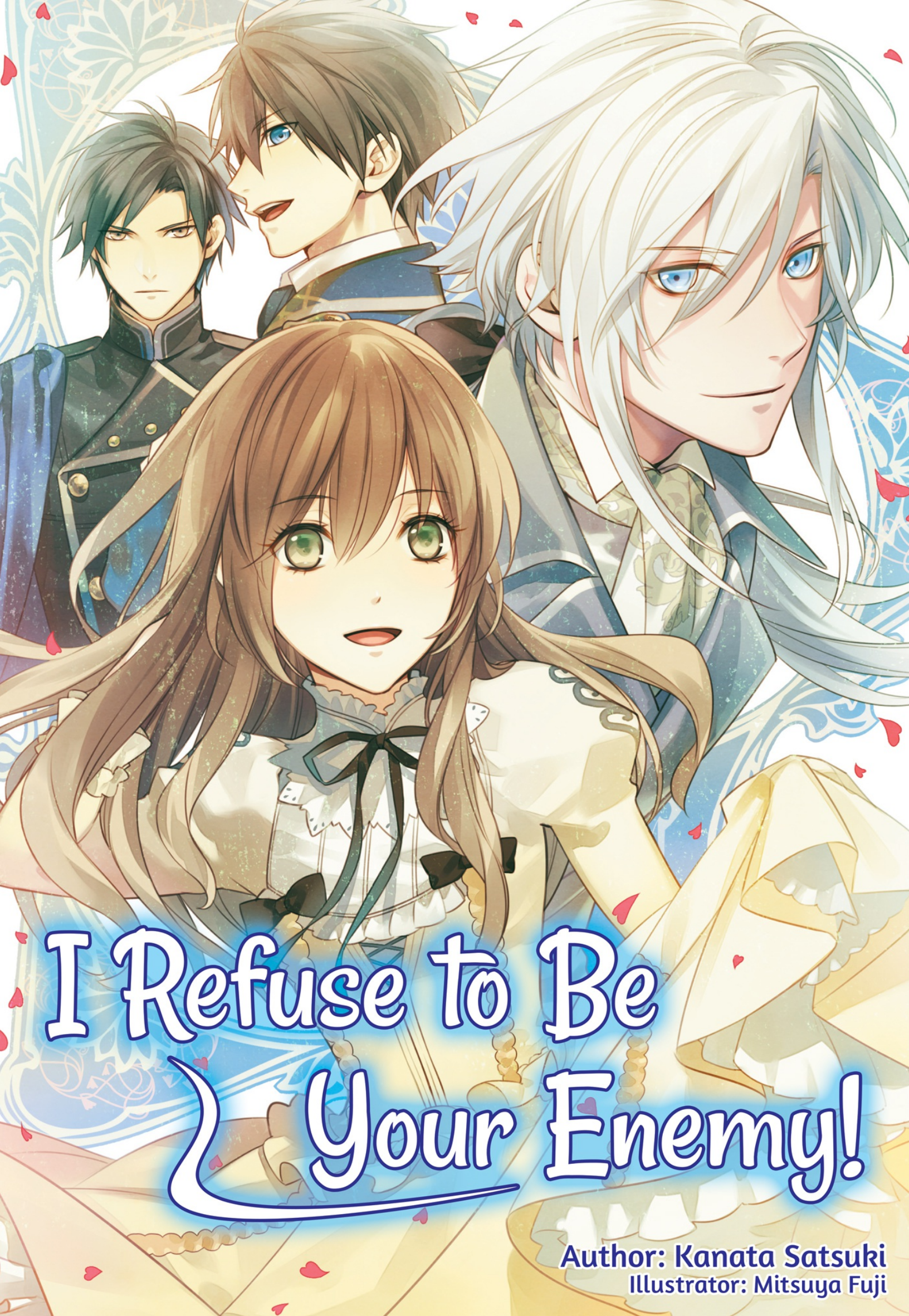




I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!

Author: Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: Mitsuya Fuji

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Alan Évrard

Cain Wentworth

Kiara Cordier

**“How’s this,
Master
Horace?”**

**“Oho!
Good,
good.”**

Horace

I tried to envision this battle like a map from the RPG.
So I crouched down and started to draw in the bare earth nearby...



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Prologue

Ever since I was a child, I kept having this strange, recurring dream. At least, that's what I thought it was.

In the dream, I found myself in a small wooden house, staring rapturously at a square-shaped object called a television. One side of the square was made of glass, and through this glass, I was able to see all sorts of things. Landscapes. Moving pictures. Women in short skirts baring their legs.

Every now and then, I would find myself gazing into a mirror, only to see a completely different "me" gazing back—a girl with perfectly straight, black hair, dark brown eyes, and a broad, flat nose.

In reality, my hair was the color of a *marron glacé*, and my eyes were a dull gray-green. Sometimes I would scrutinize my reflection in a spoon and wonder if I had some sort of subconscious desire to change my appearance.

But it wasn't until I was six years old that I started to see these dreams with exceptional clarity. I remember because it was right around then that my father took a second wife.

My stepmother was always incredibly cruel to me, but my father had never really liked children himself, so he generally turned a blind eye to my suffering. The servants all kept their distance, too, lest they put themselves at risk of losing their jobs. When I cried, I cried alone.

But once I started having those vivid dreams, I sort of... stopped caring. I stopped hoping my father would come to my rescue. And that made it easier to bear.

Unfortunately, things only got worse for me.

Three years later, after my father passed away, I was relegated to the position of servant. The culprit? My wicked stepmother, of course. She confiscated all my possessions, gave me exactly one black dress to wear (all the better to hide dirt and grime), and put me to work cleaning the house from top to bottom

every single day.

I cried in secret every night, wishing she would love me like she loved my younger half-brother. But I was merely a child, so I couldn't oppose her. If I didn't follow her orders, I would go hungry that day, and I didn't exactly want to starve to death.

But whenever I had those recurring dreams, my "other family" was always very kind to me. That tiny silver lining was what got me through these hard times.

As it turned out, however, my life as a servant only lasted a few months before it came to an abrupt end—the day I was adopted by a nobleman I had never met.

Unfortunately, my new father, the count of Patriciél, was by no means a kindhearted man. I was told he wanted a daughter to use as a political pawn, and for that purpose, he had paid a hefty sum to take me off my stepmother's hands.

On the bright side, he at least seemed to want me around, and he never withheld any meals from me. I was given a wardrobe of beautiful clothes, and his servants treated me with respect. Sure, there was no affection between us, but it was still worlds better than a life of servitude.

At age eleven, I was permitted to enroll in a parochial boarding school for daughters of nobility. Now, three years later, I was living a relatively peaceful life, learning all the ins and outs of proper etiquette while hiding my dark past. And over time, those strange recurring dreams became few and far between...



"Clearly, I was too optimistic."

Sitting on the floor of my dorm room, sunlight gleaming off the white plaster walls, I curled into a ball and sighed. After reading the most recent letter from Lord Patriciél, I had barely managed to suppress a scream—and now I was in the throes of despair.

Granted, this reaction was only natural, I think, seeing as my adoptive father had just ordered me to marry a man more than twice my age. Worse still, the

man in question was rumored to have three or four different lovers. I'd glimpsed him once, back at the Patriciél estate. He had the face of a bullfrog.

Mind you, I was no drop-dead knockout myself, but still—I was only *fourteen*. Surely a girl my age was allowed to have fanciful dreams of a handsome husband, right?!

Thinking back, Lord Patriciél had mentioned that he intended to make me an attendant to the queen. I had assumed I would be hired at the palace immediately after graduation... but I was a fool.

Supposedly, only married women were permitted to serve the queen. That way, in the event the king took one as a mistress, any illegitimate children could be passed off as her husband's. And since national policy dictated that said children would *not* be considered rightful heirs to the throne, this was a convenient way to get rid of them.

Personally, not only did I not want to get married, but I *really* didn't want to have to sleep with some old royal guy I wasn't interested in just to keep my job. But the count would never let me say no. *Ugh, somebody get me out of here!*

On top of everything else, public opinion of the queen was less than favorable.

Queen Marianne was originally the princess of Llewyrne, a kingdom that bordered our own. Llewyrne and Farzia had had a hostile relationship dating back many, many years, but eventually, once both countries were completely exhausted of troops and resources, they agreed to wed their royal families as proof of a truce.

But in recent years, Llewyrne had started to invade small countries to the east, and it was beginning to look like they were back to their usual tricks. Some were confident that Llewyrne would leave Farzia alone, seeing as their king's younger sister was our queen, but others weren't so sure. Marianne refused to assimilate into Farzian culture, and rumor had it she was on bad terms with the king.

So if I became her attendant, and then war broke out between Llewyrne and Farzia... I would end up on the queen's side, right? In which case, wouldn't everyone see me as an enemy of the state?

After everything I've been through, I just want to live a normal life! I don't want to be one of the bad guys!

Just then, all the memories of my recurring dreams flashed through my head at once, rising like a tide to the forefront of my mind.

In my dreams, I was a fourteen-year-old girl with dark hair and dark eyes who lived in a country called Japan. My other self loved to play video games—specifically RPGs. But real-time combat was too fast-paced for me, so I preferred turn-based strategy games instead. That way, I could take my time.

But my all-time favorite was a game called *Farzia: Kingdom at War*, in which the protagonist, Alan, battled against the queen and her invading army to reclaim his stolen homeland and avenge the death of the prince.

At one point during the game's storyline, the protagonist encountered a wicked spellcaster who sought to impede his progress—Kiara Credias, an attendant to the queen with chestnut-colored hair and pale green eyes.

Here in real life, the viscount I was ordered to marry was named Lord Credias... and if I complied, then I would end up with the same name as the spellcaster...

Wait, what?! Does that mean I'm that same villain?!

So as you can see, I was kind of freaking out.

Chapter 1: I'm Getting Out Of Here!

"No, no, no, this can't be happening! I can't be a villain! No, it's just a dream... That's all it is, right? Hahahaha..."

A dry laugh escaped my lips.

Nobody wants to be a villain! Villains don't get happy endings! And who doesn't love a good happy ending? Somebody please explain to me why I'm living inside a video game! This world doesn't even HAVE luxuries like video games! Surely I just have an overactive imagination... right?!

Just then, it occurred to me: in Farzian culture, vivid dreams—those you could remember long after they passed—were believed to be prophetic in nature.

The predominant religious text within Farzia and our neighboring countries was the Scripture of Jeremiah. As with most other religions, its preachings focused predominantly on living a good, honest life. *Unlike* other religions, however, it hailed dreams as gifts from God, and as such, people treated them much like horoscopes.

In Japan, if you went up to someone and said, "Last night I had this really vivid dream that my crush asked me out! Clearly he has feelings for me too!" then everyone would think you were delusional. But here in this world, if you told one of the monks, they'd pull out their dream interpretation book and start analyzing every detail, piece by piece.

I dug through all the memories of my past life, searching for the smallest possibility that these dreams weren't prophetic.

"I mean, Game-Kiara could cast magic, but I sure can't. And I've never seen anyone around here cast any either."

That said, I knew magic did indeed exist in this world. Every now and then, I'd hear about the palace hiring royal spellcasters. But while they were exceptional soldiers on the battlefield, they were also extremely rare. Even Llewyne hadn't employed any spellcasters in their recent battles.

The path to becoming a spellcaster was a closely guarded secret. Supposedly, the gift of magic passed from a veteran spellcaster to their disciples—but rumor had it that this involved forming a contract with a demon.

Wait, so... if future events play out exactly like they did in the game... does that mean I'm going to have to do that too?!

“But I don’t *want* to sign a contract with a demon!”

I’d already had a miserable childhood, and now a miserable marriage was on the way—but on top of everything else, I was bound to be inflicted with some kind of demonic curse too?! *Can’t a girl catch a break?!*

I tried to look for any more evidence to the contrary, but the queen’s name was a perfect match, and the protagonist’s surname, Évrard, matched that of the margrave’s, and the enemy country was called Llewyne... I couldn’t deny it any longer.

I was a character in a video game. And even worse, I was an antagonist.

In the game, Kiara would pop up every now and then to attack the heroes in specific areas where the queen’s invading army was stationed: forts, cities, and so on. It was actually rather annoying to fight her; she would spawn massive golems to do her bidding while she escaped.

Once the player arrived outside the queen’s castle, only then could they finally fight Kiara head-on. Naturally, this battle ended with the protagonist and his allies victorious; there was even a little animated scene where Kiara ended up impaled on someone’s sword. The memory sent goosebumps prickling up my arms.

“Nngh... I don’t want to die young! Wait, I know! What if I just don’t marry him?”

In my current state, I couldn’t use magic at all, so all I had to do was stay single. Then I wouldn’t become Kiara Credias, and I wouldn’t be forced into any demon contract, so I wouldn’t end up on the battlefield. Maybe then I could live a more peaceful life somewhere else...

That’s it. I’m getting out of here.

I pulled a small trunk out from under my bed, opened it, and took out my wallet. I still had about a hundred thousand cients to my name, given to me by the count himself right before I enrolled here. As a daughter of nobility, I was *supposed* to use it to pay the dormitory servants to clean my room or run miscellaneous errands for me, but instead, I did all my cleaning myself.

Why, you ask? Because I couldn't risk anyone coming across the vial of poison I was hiding.

This, too, was a gift from Lord Patriciél. He claimed it was "for emergencies," but what sort of emergencies required poison? Truth be told, I was tempted to dump it out somewhere, but I was worried that it would seep into the earth and make the plants wither. He hadn't told me what was in it—just that it was enough to kill a person.

It was then I realized that the kind of man who would make me carry poison at age eleven would *surely* have no qualms forcing me into a contract with a demon. How did I not see this coming? Exasperated with myself, I stuffed my wallet into my pocket. Then I hiked up my black skirt and strapped the vial of poison to my thigh, along with a dagger.

The count had taught me knife combat soon after he adopted me. Naturally, he had said it was for "self-defense," but...

First he teaches me to use a dagger, and then he gives me some poison? Who does he think I am, an assassin?

Going forward, I was going to have to live by my wits alone. The world was a dangerous place, and if I wanted to maximize my chances of survival, I would need to carry a weapon. In that sense, perhaps the count had actually done me a favor.

Alright, I'm all packed.

Carrying only whatever I could fit in my trunk, I walked out of the dormitory, taking care to walk as calmly as possible. After all, I couldn't exactly pretend I was "just going to grab something I left in the classroom" when I was carrying a suitcase full of clothes.

I didn't have anyone I could turn to, either. While I did have some casual

friends here, they were all aristocrats through and through, and if I told them I was planning to disobey my father and strike out on my own, they'd either give me a weird look, or in the worst-case scenario, tattle on me to the count "for my own good." Neither of these things would help me.

As I walked across campus, I planned my route carefully, avoiding any areas where other people were likely to be present. Then, at last, I reached the farthest edge of the school grounds.

I concealed myself between the hedge and the stone border wall, then heaved a sigh of relief. I'd come here hoping the hole I'd found as a younger student would still be here, and sure enough, it was. This was my way out.

The boarding school was located on a hill, and the closest town was just a short walk away. Once I arrived, I could change out of my school uniform, and then no one would be able to tell me apart from the ordinary townspeople. From there, I would need to look for some form of transportation out of this territory.

Ideally, I would've liked to smuggle myself into some other country, but on top of starting my life over in an unfamiliar area, the idea of having to learn an entirely new culture was rather intimidating. Fortunately, Farzia was a pretty big country; as long as I kept to a smaller, more obscure village, surely they'd never find me. After all, they'd assume a prissy rich girl couldn't hack it in a rural, backwater town.

Yes, the countryside... That's where I'll go. But not too rural... Somewhere that has at least one wealthy merchant living there. That way, I might be able to find work.

And so I slipped through the hole in the wall and out into the forest of tall trees that surrounded the school. Now that I had a rough idea of my next steps, I wasn't going to wait for sunset. But before I could take my first steps, I heard the whinny of a horse in the direction of the school gates.

Outside of the priests and the carriages that delivered fresh food in the mornings, almost no one ever visited this school. Was there some sort of family emergency that required a student to leave? Or... had Lord Patriciél sent a carriage to collect me? I decided to go find out.

To my relief, the carriage's intended recipient appeared to be a male student about my age—one I vaguely recognized.

Once I confirmed the carriage wasn't for me, the panic cleared from my mind... and that was when I noticed the *other* carriage, which appeared to be reserved exclusively for luggage. The hood was up, so I couldn't tell how full it was, but... would it be possible to smuggle myself inside? By carriage, I could cover a lot of ground rather quickly, all the while concealing myself from potential pursuers. And if I was careful, I could quietly hop out once we had crossed the border out of the Royal Domain. That way, I wouldn't cause them any trouble.

As I watched attentively for my big chance, the dark-haired boy suddenly turned on his heel and sprinted back into the school building; evidently he'd forgotten something. His servant(?), a silver-haired boy, followed after him. Also present were five knights on horseback, likely to serve as bodyguards; they, too, were distracted by the boy's mad dash.

And then the Goddess played her flute—a Farzian idiom for when an opportunity unexpectedly presents itself. Supposedly, the Goddess' flute could summon miracles from afar. And as for me, I was pretty sure I heard her trill.

The next thing I knew, my body was moving on autopilot as I dashed over to the hooded carriage and climbed inside. By some miracle, no one noticed; perhaps it truly was the work of the Goddess. Then, a short while later, I felt the carriage commence as if I wasn't even there.

As the luggage began to rattle and sway, I moved to the back, where the driver was less likely to hear me. The floor of the carriage was littered with boxes of all sizes, so there wasn't much walking space. I located a large box containing a small shelf covered in cloth, relocated the shelf to a spot where it wouldn't topple over, then climbed into the box myself.

Tucked away in my hiding place, I let out a sigh of relief. As the tension drained from my body, I suddenly found myself quite sleepy. Rocked by the motions of the carriage, my back knocked painfully against the side of the box, but even that wasn't enough to stop me. Before I knew it, I had fallen fast asleep.



Five hours later, Évrard and company arrived at a small town. The inn they'd booked was small and cozy—a brick building that was originally someone's home prior to being remodeled.

Alan's assigned room was so small that he could only walk two steps with his hand outstretched before he touched the far wall. Dinner was unsophisticated: processed meat, vegetable soup, and a small loaf of hard bread. But he and the other knights had been trained for battlefield conditions from an early age, and as such, he was used to frugal meals and less-than-extravagant sleeping quarters. After all, a margrave's duty was to defend the national border, and as the son of Margrave Évrard, that duty extended to him, too.

After dinner, Alan took a stroll outside the inn with his equally young associate. They hadn't seen each other in a while, and there was a lot to talk about. Accompanied by a single guard, they walked along, chatting merrily.

But if an outsider had been around to overhear them, they would have overheard something quite peculiar:

"Truth be told, it feels so suffocating to be shuttled around in a carriage."

"I quite agree. I much prefer riding a horse, even if it means my legs are worse off."

"Sad to say, but a carriage is our only option."

"You could share a horse with Wentworth, you know."

"Ridiculous. I'm not *sharing a horse* with another man. In case you've forgotten, I'm fifteen!"

"What other choice is there, if we're short on horses?"

Alan grimaced as his blue-eyed companion snickered at him. Judging from their unreserved banter, one would understand them to be equals. They carried on in this fashion for some time... but right as they passed by the carriage house where the carriages were parked for the night, Alan's associate stopped short.

"What's the matter, Reggie?"

"Shh. Listen closely."

The other boy, Reggie, closed his eyes. Alan, too, fell silent and perked up his ears. Then, finally, he heard the sound Reggie was referring to.

“Sausage... Cream... No, I’m stuffed...”

There was a muffled voice coming from the carriage house—which was by all accounts empty, save for their two carriages.

Alan’s expression stiffened. The voice was young and female, but that didn’t mean they could let their guards down. After all, if this person had managed to board the margrave’s carriage undetected, then it could be an assassin for all he knew.

“Is she... talking in her sleep? We need to drag her out of there while we have the chance.” Alan hailed the nearby guard.

In contrast, Reggie cocked his head pensively. “I’m not sure... If we were dealing with an assassin here, would she really risk sleeping on the job? Especially considering all the guards we have with us?”

“You never take these things seriously,” Alan snorted. Fortunately, his companion didn’t seem opposed to tracking down the stowaway, at the very least. He turned to the guard. “We suspect someone’s aboard the carriage.”

“Stay back. I’ll investigate.”

The tall, dark-haired knight beckoned to the rest of his squad, who had tagged along in secret. One of them remained with Alan and Reggie, while the other accompanied the dark-haired knight into the carriage house.

As they tracked the voice, they learned that it was coming not from the passenger carriage, but the hooded luggage carriage. The dark-haired knight attempted to enter from the back, but his body was too large, so he started shifting boxes out of the way.

“Wait, Wentworth.” Reggie jogged over to the carriage.

“Reggie! Don’t!” Alan hissed, as loud as he could reasonably get away with without waking the stowaway. But Reggie had already run around to the front of the carriage and climbed aboard. The dark-haired knight, Wentworth, dashed up to the front to try to stop him, but it was too late.

Before they could react, Reggie peeked out from around the hood. *Thank the heavens, he's safe.* Everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

"Damn it, Reggie, don't run off on your own! You need to act in a manner befitting of your station!"

"Oh, I'm fine. See?"

As he spoke, Reggie hopped out of the carriage... carrying a brown-haired girl wearing a familiar black school uniform. She looked to be a bit younger than they were.

"I found her sound asleep in there," Reggie grinned. "And if she's a student from your school, then that means she's the daughter of a noble, right?"

Evidently, he didn't see her as very dangerous. Alan scowled.

"She could've stolen that uniform from anyone," he warned. "That said, she certainly doesn't *look* like a commoner. More importantly, how were you able to lift her without rousing her?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's just a *really* sound sleeper."

It didn't add up. Surely even the heaviest sleeper would snap awake if someone grabbed them.

"Let me take her, milord," said Wentworth. "I need to examine her."

At his prompting, Reggie handed over the girl, and together they all headed back to the inn. Once they arrived back at Alan's room, Wentworth laid her down on the bed. Still, she did not stir.

Under the bright light, she was starting to look more and more like an ordinary heiress. Her light brown hair was healthy and glossy, and though it was a little messy at the moment, it was clear she brushed it every day. Her skin was pale from minimal exposure to the sun, and her fingers showed no telltale traces of "dishpan hands."

Furthermore, when they removed her boots, it became clear that they weren't borrowed, but rather tailor-made to fit her feet. Now even Wentworth was starting to believe that she was merely an innocent stowaway.

"If she turns out to be high-born, I'll need you to apologize on my behalf,

milord,” he said to Alan as he started to rummage through her pockets.

From there, he produced a soft cotton handkerchief and a wallet. Its contents were fairly sizable, casting further doubt upon the possibility that she was a commoner. Lastly, from the inner pocket of her coat, he retrieved a piece of white stationery.

“A letter?”

“With this, I can confirm that she’s a student from your school. Take a look.” Wentworth offered the letter to Alan, who took it. Together with Reggie, he peered down at the brief message penned therein.

The sender: Lord Patriciél. Evidently she was his daughter... but this “letter” was more of a directive, with the sort of commanding language one would use to address a servant. Apparently, a marriage had been arranged for her, and she was to drop out of school immediately. Further, he would be sending a carriage to pick her up and bring her home in time for the ceremony.

“And to the viscount of Credias, of all people...”

“Yeesh. She has my condolences.”

Not only was the man old enough to be her father, but he was an infamous lecher who was rumored to keep a harem of women in his manor. Clearly this girl—“Kiara,” according to the letterhead—had escaped from the school in protest of this arranged marriage.

Meanwhile, Alan was baffled. One would think all this patting and digging around would have startled her awake, and yet she slept right through it. Just then, Reggie sniffed the air.

“Aha! I’ve figured it out, Alan. A sleeping-draught’s been brushed onto the stationery!”

“What?!” Alan nearly dropped the letter in his surprise, but Reggie snatched it deftly between his index and middle finger.

“I imagine the plan was for her to breathe in the fumes while she read it, allowing the draught to kick in almost instantly. Most of it has evaporated by now, but back when she first took it out of the envelope, I bet she inhaled quite

a lot.” Reggie stared down at the sleeping Kiara, his expression stony. “It’s obvious the count was intending to take her home by force.”

“That’s a hell of a way to treat his own daughter, don’t you think?”

Was he really that desperate to enact this political marriage? Even the usually stoic Wentworth was frowning with concern.

“Clearly he anticipated that she’d try to escape, so instead he decided to knock her unconscious. And by the time she woke, the deed would already be done,” Reggie surmised. “Regardless, I think it’s safe to say she’s no assassin.”



Blissfully unaware of the situation I had landed myself in, I continued to sleep... and sleep... and sleep... until the sun had risen the next day. As I stirred, I could tell that I’d been out for quite some time; in a sense, I was actually impressed I’d slept for so long in a hard wooden box. Perhaps I was just a *really* sound sleeper.

Vaguely, it occurred to me that this box felt an awful lot like a regular bed.

Then I opened my eyes... and found an unfamiliar older boy staring back.

“Wha... AAAAAAAHHHH!”

The scream caught in my throat, and I doubled forward into a coughing fit that brought tears to my eyes. As I coughed, the unfamiliar boy started to rub my back. *Ugh... Thank you.*

Still, I needed to stay on guard.

“Th-Thank you,” I sputtered, looking up at him. He didn’t seem flustered; instead, he pulled his hand away and continued to observe me like a scientist watching a lab rat.

He had a head of dark hair, and he wore a dark gray, long-sleeved tunic made of thick fabric, with elaborate embroidery here and there. Judging from the blue cloak and the sword hanging at his hip, he looked to be a knight in service to a noble house.

Having only just woken up, my mind was still fuzzy. However, a few moments later, I realized that I was decidedly *not* aboard a carriage. Moreover, I was in a

bed in a room somewhere.

And when I finally realized who had found me, I very nearly leapt out of my skin.

“Eeeek! I’m really sorry for sneaking onto your carriage!”

Sitting on my knees, I bent forward until my forehead touched the mattress, hoping against hope that they would accept my apology.

“I did it purely on impulse, and for that, I’m sorry! I took one look at your carriage, and then I swear I heard the Goddess play her flute, so I went for it! I promise I’ll be out of your hair as fast as humanly possible! Oh, and I can pay you for the ride! I’ll give you a fat tip as a token of my apology, so please don’t press charges!”

Terrified, I plunged a shaking hand into my pocket and pulled some money out of my wallet. But when I moved to put it on the side table, I instead tumbled face-first off the bed.

“Whooooa!”

There was a loud *THUD* as I hit the wooden floor. Reeling from the pain (not to mention the blow to my ego), I found myself temporarily incapacitated.

First they had caught me illegally trespassing aboard their carriage, then they had carried me inside so I could sleep in a proper bed, and now I had just disgraced myself in front of them. If there was a Kiara-sized hole nearby, I wanted to crawl into it and never come out.

The guy didn’t even crack a smile, either. Awkward.

But just as I was trying to decide how to remedy the situation, someone started laughing.

“Pffft... hahaha! That’s the first time I’ve ever seen a girl tumble out of bed!”

I had assumed the dark-haired deadpan guy was the only other person in the room, but evidently I was mistaken. I looked up to find that the door was open, and two young guys were standing there.

The dark-haired one was wearing the boys’ version of my black boarding school uniform, which meant he was assuredly the owner of the carriage I’d

boarded. He gave me a blank stare as the other boy next to him cackled hysterically.

The giggler, meanwhile, had long, glossy silver hair tied back in a ponytail, with shorter strands that fell over his ears. Likewise, his skin was nearly as pale as his hair, and his eyes, currently swimming in tears of laughter, were bright blue in color.

As for his clothes, he wore a navy blue coat over a white collared tunic—attendant's garb, by my estimation. After all, those knee-length coats came with large pockets designed to hold letters and other delivery items. But something about his attire struck me as almost... holy, in a way. Possibly because he was just that handsome.

On reflex, I found myself wanting to ask "Are you an angel?" but fortunately, I had the sense to bite my tongue. After all, he was a guy; I wasn't sure he would appreciate that sort of comparison. Still, I couldn't take my eyes off him. It felt like I'd seen him somewhere before...

A beat later, the dark-haired boy (whom I also vaguely recognized) jabbed the silver-haired boy in the arm. "That's enough, Reggie."

"Sorry, Alan. It just tickled me, that's all. Anyway, are you alright, miss? Can you stand?"

The silver-haired boy (Reggie, apparently) walked over and offered me his hand. For a moment, I stared at him in a daze, then gingerly reached out to accept—

"Reggie!"

"Milord!"

—but froze, startled, as the two other guys shouted in unison. *Come now, I won't bite*, I thought with a frown, but then it hit me. *Of course*. I was a total stranger to these people. Worse still, I was caught stowing away aboard their vehicle. They had every right to suspect me of ill will.

Thus, I decided it was best I didn't accept his help—but before I could retract my hand, he seized me by the wrist.



“There’s nothing to fear, you two. I believe this is a residual effect of the sleeping-draught.”

“What are you—ack!”

Sure enough, right as he pulled me to my feet, my knees buckled, and I slumped back to the floor. I blinked in surprise. Had all that sleep weakened me so terribly?

Meanwhile, Reggie still held me by the wrist, though he didn’t seem interested in giving it a second try. Instead, he turned back to the other two.

“See? Clearly this is another effect of the sedative, intended to keep her from escaping. There’s no way a lucid person would tumble face-first off the bed like that.”

“Wait, what? ‘Keep me from escaping’?”

I was embarrassed to learn that he’d witnessed my less-than-graceful swan dive to the floor, but more importantly, something else had caught my attention. Who was I supposed to be escaping, exactly? And what sedative was he talking about? When did I ingest such a thing? Suddenly, I found myself paranoid. Did these men do this to me?

Just then, Alan finally broke his long silence.

“Last night, we found you asleep in our carriage,” he explained.

Yes, that made sense. I could remember nodding off to sleep in there.

“So we carried you out, but you didn’t wake. Then we tried shaking you and shouting at you, both to no avail. And since you were a stowaway, we needed to take every precaution, so we examined your possessions. That’s how we came across the letter from your father... and we determined that it was laced with a sleeping agent.”

He held up the letter I had received from Lord Patriciél.

“What...? So he put a sleeping-draught... in the letter?” *Was that really necessary?*

“Lady Kiara Patriciél, we believe your father attempted to sedate you in order

to prevent you from escaping the arranged marriage prescribed in this letter. And sure enough, that is precisely what you attempted to do. However, you managed to find your way to safety before the sleeping-draught took effect.”

“Nngh...”

Sure enough, I’d taken one look at that letter and bolted like a bat out of hell. After all, he was only my *adoptive* father; there was no love between us. I didn’t much care if his plans were dashed. I was fourteen, and I was convinced that with a bit of hard work, I could make it on my own.

At no point, however, did I suspect that the count might have laced the letter with a sleeping agent in order to take me home and marry me off by force. I suppose even *he* must have realized that no one in their right mind would happily agree to marry an awful lecher like Lord Credias.

God, I’m so glad I got out of there.

The second this thought crossed my mind, a wave of mingled relief and exhaustion washed over me, and my upper body slumped forward.

“You alright?” Reggie asked gently, still holding my hand.

“Frankly, I feel like passing out... but I know that’ll just create more hassle for everyone, so I’ll endure it.”

After all, it was probably really annoying to have to carry my unconscious body—and I’d put them through it once already, so I didn’t want to make this first impression any worse.

Then Reggie started snickering again. *A real giggler, this guy.*

From there, I explained my circumstances—that the count had “adopted” me from my stepmother, and that I ran from the marriage due to my would-be fiancé’s terrible reputation. Obviously I couldn’t tell them about my past life, so I wasn’t able to explain that I was trying to avoid being turned into a villain. Fortunately, they seemed reasonably convinced that a girl who had essentially been sold into slavery wouldn’t want to be forced into marriage.

To be fair, this world likely had its share of horrible biological parents as well, but to them, this inhumane treatment seemed to make more sense coming

from someone who wasn't related to me by blood.

"What on earth were you planning to do after you left the dormitory?" Alan asked, his annoyance plain as he sat across from me on the opposite bed.

Alan was fifteen, one year my senior, which explained how we'd never met. At school, classes were grouped mostly by age and by gender. The only exception was theology class, which boys and girls attended together. Without some invested research on my part, I never would have had the opportunity to meet him.

"Well, I figured I have enough money for carriage fare, so I thought I'd travel to a distant corner of some other territory and make my living doing... I don't know, needlework or something."

"And then some kidnapper would've come along and snatched you right off the road," Wentworth muttered under his breath, his expression impassive. Supposedly he was Alan's knight-guard.

He was absolutely right, of course, but due to a certain undisclosed reason, I was just that desperate. *I wish I could be honest with them. Ugh, it's so frustrating having to keep these secrets.*

As I awkwardly averted my eyes, Alan's attendant Reggie spoke up. "Same difference, really. You read the letter. The count was already planning to kidnap her himself."

He did have a point. Either way, I would've been sold off to someone against my will. The only difference was that in the letter, my future owner was named outright.

"Out of the furnace and into the fire," Wentworth mused, seemingly convinced. *Excellent. Thank you, Reggie.*

That said, this Reggie person struck me as peculiar. He was an attendant—a servant—and yet he addressed his master, Alan, like one would a friend. Was there more to the story? Curious as I was, I couldn't bring myself to ask. After all, once I left, I wouldn't be seeing them again.

In fact, I was pretty sure I needed to minimize our interactions at all costs. Why? Because once I learned Alan's surname, I nearly screamed.

Alan Évrard, son of Margrave Évrard. As it turned out, I very much knew who he was. Not because we'd met at boarding school—but *because he was the protagonist of that video game*.

The reason I didn't realize sooner was because he was two years younger than his game counterpart, who was seventeen at the start of the storyline. At the moment, he only came up to Wentworth's chin, but in two years' time he would grow taller, and his face would lose much of its youthful roundness. In my experience, puberty had the tendency to make guys more... what's the word... broad? Rugged?

In the game, Alan's expression was always grim and joyless—focused entirely on the objective before him, like a sort of tunnel vision. The real-life Alan was still serious in temperament, mind you, but not quite to that extent.

There was one other reason I didn't recognize him right away: his name was so commonplace. At school, at least two of the girls I knew had a brother named Alan. So when I heard that this guy's name was Alan, my only real reaction was "Oh hey, another Alan. I guess it was a popular baby name back then."

Now that I knew who he was, however, sharing a room with him had become incredibly uncomfortable. Granted, I hadn't reached villain status yet, but if destiny had had its way, this was the guy who would've killed me. On top of that, I'd smuggled myself aboard his carriage. And since I wasn't originally "on his side," I felt exceedingly out of place here.

Thus, I decided it was high time we parted ways.

"Well, um... Again, I'm sorry for what I did. I'll probably recover my mobility once enough time has passed, and I'm sure you all have somewhere to be, so by all means, feel free to get going without me."

The sun was now high in the sky—noontime or thereabouts, by my estimation. Because of me, they were wasting precious daylight. And yet, for some reason, they declined my suggestion.

"Think about it. We're talking about the sort of man who was planning to kidnap you while you were unconscious. Do you really think he'll just shrug his shoulders and give up?" Reggie remarked.

Alan grimaced at the implication. “Our boarding school receives very few visitors as it is. First they’ll comb the area within the distance she could have reasonably traveled on foot—and when they don’t find her, they’ll start looking at the visitor records. Then they’ll see that our carriages departed the same day she went missing, and they’ll track us down. Plus, they’ll have full knowledge of the sedative’s effects. If they *know* she should still be incapacitated, and they haven’t found her collapsed on the side of the road, they’ll start searching the inns, one by one. Long story short: they’re going to find you here.”

“Nngh...”

He was completely right. In order to haul away my unconscious body while the drug was still in effect, the count would’ve needed to send a carriage straight away... so it was entirely possible they already knew I was missing and had started a full-scale search. In that case, it wouldn’t take long for them to arrive. And in the meantime, my legs were still jelly.

As I was trying to figure out my next move, Alan sighed in exasperation and looked at Reggie. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather we *didn’t* put ourselves at risk by harboring this fugitive.”

“What’s the harm? Come now, you’re a better man than that. The Alan I know would never leave a helpless lamb to be torn apart by the wolves.”

Surely this was intended as a compliment, and yet Alan scowled. “Oh, *I’m* the softie here? This was all *your* idea. You’re the real bleeding heart!”

“Is that so?” Reggie asked nonchalantly. “I’d have to disagree. After all, it’s *your* family who will be harboring her.”

“Taking in strays off the street puts us all at risk, Reggie. Someone could get hurt. Sensitive information could get leaked. We shouldn’t do this.”

“I get that. But are you going to be able to sleep at night, knowing we abandoned her to her fate? Because I don’t think I could.”

“Hmph...” Alan started to say something, but instead turned to me.

Naturally, I had put two and two together by this point. Apparently Alan was of a mind to help me somehow—shuttle me to a distant town, perhaps? I gazed at him hopefully for a moment, and he seemed to intuit what I was feeling.

“Don’t get excited. You might not like what I’m about to offer you.”

“Or perhaps I will! I won’t know until you say it.” *Out with it, then!*

“You think she’d be a bit more devastated, considering she just found out her father drugged her. She must be the optimistic type,” Reggie murmured, impressed.

Sorry, but I don’t have time to throw myself a pity party. That can wait until AFTER I’ve escaped! I thought to myself.

Meanwhile, Alan let out another long sigh. “Theoretically, we could help you escape. You could work at my estate, if you so desired. After all, if we left you in some random town, you’d inevitably turn to a life of crime in order to survive—and that’s the *best*-case scenario. So to keep that off my conscience, I’d rather we took you with us.”

Work for him? If so, that would mean I’d officially join his side... and that would make it much less likely I’d end up a villain!

“Sounds great! I’m in!” I responded eagerly and without hesitation.

“I’m not finished,” Alan cautioned me, holding up a hand. “If we employ you, we’ll have to keep your family affiliations a secret, lest we land ourselves in hot water with Lord Patriciél. And we’re not on the best of terms with him as it is.”

The count had long-standing ties with Llewyne, since he used to own land there. Hence he sided with them in *Farzia: Kingdom at War*. And since the Évrard territory served as the border between Farzia and Llewyne, they were the first line of defense. But that wasn’t all that put him at odds with the House of Évrard; he had simply never liked them to begin with.

“In order to keep you hidden, we may ask you to work as a commoner. And even if you change your mind afterward, you won’t be allowed to leave the territory without permission—we can’t risk anyone leaking intel. Break the rules, and you’ll go straight to the dungeon. So, still willing to accept?”

If he thought any of that would change my mind, he was *sorely* mistaken. After all, if I stayed on Évrard land, the chances of me turning evil drastically decreased. Besides, these men had treated me very kindly in spite of my selfish actions, so I was sure his family was full of good, honest people. *After all, their*

son's a video game protagonist.

Plus, working at the margrave's estate was sure to pay better than common needlework. I couldn't possibly have asked for a better opportunity.

I beamed back at him. "I don't object in the slightest. By all means, let me work for the House of Évrard! If you need me to forsake my nobility to masquerade as a commoner, then consider it done! Should I change my first name too? Whatever you need, I'll do it!"

He blinked at me in disbelief. Wentworth stared, equally dumbfounded. And as for Reggie, he was clutching his sides, shoulders shaking, like he was trying to hold back another bout of hysterical laughter. Alan looked over at him, perplexed. *Is Reggie not usually this much of a giggler or something?*

And so it was decided that I would accompany their group back to the Évrard estate, where I would be hired to work for them. We set off at once, heading up the northeast high road.

When we left, my legs were still out of commission, so Wentworth was kind enough to carry me like a bride to the luggage carriage. It wasn't as embarrassing as my pratfall earlier this morning, but it was still fairly awkward, especially with Alan, Reggie, and all the knights watching.

It was then, however, that I realized why I couldn't walk: *because I couldn't feel my legs*. They were so numb, I couldn't feel his arm tucked under my knees as he carried me, and when I closed my eyes, it felt like I was levitating. This loss of sensation terrified me.

As for the reason I ended up in the luggage carriage, they had actually offered to let me sit with Alan and the others, but I turned them down. After all, if they were really going to treat me like a commoner, then I couldn't very well ride in the same carriage as the young heir of the house.

"Who *is* that Reggie guy, anyway?"

I dug through my memories of Game-Farzia, trying to recall if there was a Game-Reggie at any point. He seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place him; I couldn't remember anything except major battles and plot points. Still, considering he was on such good terms with the protagonist, I was convinced

he had to have his own character counterpart.

Maybe he was left out of the storyline because he's not a soldier?

That made sense. While the game had brief dialogue exchanges and occasional animated cutscenes, combat gameplay was the main focus.

As the feeling steadily returned to my legs, I swayed them to and fro. The knights had rearranged the interior so I could sit on an aptly-sized box; they even let me borrow a cushion. At first it felt like every jolt of the carriage was going to send me careening to the floor again, but as my legs slowly recovered, so did my sense of balance. An hour later, they were fully functional once more.

Man, am I ever glad I got out of there.

Once they told me about the sedative, I instantly knew I'd made the right choice. If I hadn't bolted when I did, I would've conked out on the floor, and then someone from the House of Patriciel would've come along and collected me, and then... *Ugh, I don't even want to IMAGINE what would've happened next.*

Sure, I would've landed a cushy job at the royal palace, but in exchange, I'd have had to sleep with a disgusting old man.

Maybe that explains it...

Perhaps Game-Kiara served the queen so faithfully because she didn't want to go back to her husband's estate. If so, I couldn't blame her. After what she went through, I'd be traumatized too. In fact, perhaps Lord Patriciel planned it this way on purpose so I would want to ally with the queen. I shuddered.

Then, before I knew it, it was lunchtime.

They handed me two pieces of bread with grilled meat folded inside, and I ate it with gratitude. It was a little dry, but I didn't care. I washed it down with some water and sighed in satisfaction.

Just then, Reggie walked into my field of vision a short distance away. He beckoned to me; the knights watched him do it, but didn't stop him. Curious, I approached him.

Next, he led me into a grove of trees a short distance from the road. Above

us, the autumn sky was clear, and the crisp air was thick with the smell of fallen leaves. *What sort of conversation would require this much privacy?* I wondered.

Then he stopped, smiled, and said:

“Could you show me your legs, please?”

“Wh-What?!”

My legs? Why? In Farzia, it was considered shameful for a girl ten or older to expose anything above her ankles. Even if it was an accident, anyone who witnessed her in that state would judge her and call her a harlot. Surely this sort of request was reserved for more... intimate situations... *Oh god! I thought he was an angel, but... what if he's actually a total womanizer?!* Frightened, I took a step back.

When it came to romantic relations, I knew the basics. But even my past-life memories didn't extend past age fourteen for some reason, so when it came to the intricacies of how to navigate such a thing, I was utterly clueless. After all, I didn't have any previous experience.

In my past life, girls were generally encouraged to fight back against their harassers, but in a world with a rigid class system, I couldn't exactly use physical force against a nobleman's attendant. Especially not after I'd agreed to be treated as a commoner.

I took another step back, but Reggie countered with a step forward. This process repeated itself until I inadvertently backed myself against a tree, at which point Reggie placed both hands on either side of my shoulders, boxing me in. For some reason this reminded me of a crossing gate at the train tracks; I could almost hear the whistle of the oncoming locomotive, warning me that I was in danger.

Trapped, I started to tremble. He chuckled. “Let me guess... A dagger and a vial?”

I gasped. He was right—I was still wearing them strapped to my thigh. But until recently, I'd lost all feeling in my legs, so I'd completely forgotten. And since no one else had asked about them until now, my pannier must have kept them hidden.

But Reggie had realized I was armed, and now he was demanding I remove them.

“If Wentworth and the others find out, things could get very complicated for you,” he explained.

It seemed he was willing to keep quiet about it so long as I did as he asked... in which case, his request to see my legs was probably more of a request for me to come clean. This realization made my face flush pink with shame, as I had very nearly leapt to the most awkward false conclusion imaginable: that Reggie was coming on to me.

“I’ll give them to you later, I promise,” I squeaked in a tiny voice.

Going forward, I would need to convince Reggie that I meant them no ill will, so I was willing to cooperate, but taking them off right this moment would prove... challenging.

But Reggie responded to this in a way I never would have imagined.

“You need to give them to me now, okay?”

Startled, I looked up at him. He smiled sweetly back.

“I want you to remove it where I can see you. That way I can check for any other concealed weapons while I’m at it. You wouldn’t want me to have to rip them off you by force, right?”

“Nnngghh...”

He was right. Plus, we’d only just met yesterday, so even if I promised him I wouldn’t use them, he probably wouldn’t trust me. Still, I couldn’t just *hike up my skirt* while someone else was watching! *I don’t have a thing for humiliation, buddy!*

At the same time, however, I got the sense that I was in no position to decline, so I decided to look at it from a past-life point of view. After all, I was wearing bloomers down to my calves, and the weapons were belted *over* the bloomers. To compare it to the clothes in Japan, I was basically wearing sweatpants underneath. Surely that was more acceptable than bare skin.

Yeah, that’s it! Think of the short-shorts I used to wear in my past life! And the

bikinis! See? Compared to that, this is nothing!

Still, for the sake of my last lingering dregs of shame, I decided I needed to do this with my back turned.

“G-Give me a moment,” I stammered.

He seemed to sense that I was going to cooperate, and so he took a step back to afford me some room. Relieved, I angled my body to hide as much as possible as I lifted my skirt and removed the leather belt from my thigh. I knew I wouldn’t be able to prevent him from seeing my calves, but at the very least, I maintained my modesty from the knees up.

Then I hastily fixed my skirt, turned back, and handed him the belt, weapons and all. Fortunately, he accepted it without asking me to show more. *Maybe he already knows I’m not concealing anything else... Wait, does that mean he looked up my skirt while I was sleeping?!*

At this belated realization, I bit back a mortified scream.

“Why were you wearing this, anyway? I understand you probably wanted a way to protect yourself while you’re on the run, but... how did a daughter of nobility acquire such things in the first place?”

“Well... Lord Patriciél trained me in knife combat for some reason,” I answered honestly. “And when I enrolled in boarding school, he gave me this vial of poison to take with me.”

His expression hardened. “Interesting.”

“Once I got to school, I wanted to throw it out but didn’t know where... so I just held onto it. But since I was planning to go it alone, I figured I should bring it with me for self-defense.”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly safe to travel these roads on your own. If it were me, I probably would have done the same. Alright then.”

“Please, you’ve got to believe me. I would never try to use these weapons against you or Lord Alan.”

I gazed at him, my hands balled tightly into fists. “Alright then” was not the same thing as “I trust you,” and I was scared that I’d put him on guard. If they

wanted to dump me on the side of the road, I could understand that well enough, but... what if they threw me in the dungeon the second we arrived at their estate? And what if they never let me out for the rest of my life? The whole point of this daring escape was to *avoid* a tragic death!

“If you hadn’t complied with my request, then I imagine we would’ve had to start considering our other options. But when faced with a choice between your dignity and my trust, you chose the latter. Isn’t that right, Kiara?”

He smiled at me, and it was then that I finally understood: the purpose behind his outrageous request was to see if I would be willing to follow orders. And evidently I had passed the test.

Next, Reggie took me by the hand and led me to a nearby riverbank. He opened the vial and sniffed it; once he determined that it was safe for plants, he dumped the contents at the foot of the closest tree. I explained to him how I’d feared that it would create a giant, conspicuous patch of dead grass wherever I chose to dump it, and he snickered at me.

Then he loaded the emptied vial back into its pouch on my belt and flung the whole thing into the deepest part of the river. Truth be told, part of me was scared to lose my only weapons, but at the same time, I was a little bit relieved that they were gone. With my past-life memories now fresh in my mind, daggers and the like just seemed so... *unsafe*.

Reggie glanced back at me and blinked. “You look pretty happy, considering I just permanently disarmed you.”

“Perhaps it’s strange, but it feels as though I’m finally free.”

At this, Reggie reached out and—inexplicably—stroked my hair. His gentle touch brought back old memories. When was the last time someone caressed me like this? Not since my mother died, perhaps. My father was never affectionate, in words or in gestures.

As I pined for a maternal embrace from days long past, Reggie took my hand once more. “Let’s head back.”

I nodded and obediently followed after him.



From then on, Reggie would come and talk to me during every break. In fact, sometimes he would grab my hand and drag me to where the others were standing to join the conversation. Perhaps he wanted me to be more social... or perhaps this was his way of showing that he didn't harbor any lingering suspicions towards me.

As for Alan and the knights, they acted a little awkward around me at first, but thankfully, by the third day of our journey, they had acclimated to my presence. I didn't have much to talk about other than school, but fortunately they found the stories of my escapades reasonably entertaining. Then Alan asked me about my coursework, and my inability to answer made it plain that I hadn't actually studied much at all.

"Good grief. I'm amazed you didn't flunk out," he sighed.

Yeah, well, I've basically dropped out now anyway, so lay off!

And so our peaceful travels continued; I sat in the luggage carriage, rocking back and forth with the motions and staring into space.

The most unique aspect about this world compared to the last, however, was that ours was rife with monsters—for example, wolves that could control the wind, or vultures that could freeze you in place with a single squawk. In other words, Farzia was your standard fantasy world.

And it was on this day that we had the first monster encounter of our journey.

We were traveling across a rocky meadow in the direction of a deep, dark forest. The knights were all on guard in anticipation of an attack—but as it turned out, our enemy struck not from the forest, but the meadow itself. And these creatures were decidedly not animal in appearance.

All around us, the grass rippled violently. I watched idly from the back of the carriage, wondering if the wind had picked up or something, when suddenly—

"Whoa!"

—the meadow itself began to scatter sparks as a bolt of lightning crackled over the grass.

"Zapgrass!" someone shouted.

Now I understood. Zapgrass was a type of grass—or was it an animal?—that could create static electricity by rubbing its blades together. Supposedly, it could walk using the roots that grew out of its bulb.

“Wow, they weren’t kidding! And it’s headed this way!”

With a dry crunching sound, the patch of grass hoisted up its roots and started crawling in our direction, all the while crackling with static. Oddly, the wrinkles on its bulb resembled the face of a jolly old man.

Reflexively, I backed away further into the carriage until I was safely shielded from the sparks... but unfortunately, I’d forgotten that this carriage had horses attached to it.

A shrill whinny pierced the air, and the next thing I knew, the carriage jolted violently as the horses reared. The sudden upward motion sent me flying out through the opening in the back.

“Owww... AAAAHHH!”

Luckily for me, my landing was cushioned by my bulky pannier and the soft, thick grass, so the worst I suffered was the pain of impact. But then I saw the zapgrass crawling my way, dragging its roots along... and although it was only an arm’s length in size, now that I was lying helpless on the ground, it looked downright enormous.

Panicked, I tried to escape, but my legs were shaking so badly that I couldn’t stand. Instead, I fumbled along on my hands and knees. Unfortunately, the luggage carriage had been positioned just outside the forest, so I didn’t have a lot of options in terms of refuge.

Just then, a static spark brushed my arm.

“Aah! Ow ow ow!”

Did it burn me? Either way, the pain snapped me to my senses. I leapt to my feet and started running as fast as I could. The knights were all busy calming the horses and defending the carriages from the zapgrasses; when they spotted me, they stopped and stared in disbelief.

“What the...? You fell out?!”

Apparently they hadn't even noticed.

"Just stay behind us!" shouted Wentworth, who was the captain of the squad. But he didn't need to convince me—I was already jogging over to Alan and Reggie, who were holding onto the horses' reins to ensure they'd stay put.

Out of breath, I collapsed next to them. They stared at me, mouths agape.

"I thought you were in the carriage!"

"I fell out," I wheezed, gasping for air.

"No wonder it was so quiet in there," Alan muttered. Judging from the implication, he seemed to think I was some kind of noisemaker, but I certainly didn't remember ever doing anything to earn that sort of reputation.

Thankfully, by the time I caught my breath, the knights had finished fighting off the zapgrasses. One hard smack with a tree branch could knock them unconscious; after that, all that remained was to fling them as far away as possible.

Now I understood why the meadow here was so barren. After all, the zapgrasses would scorch any trees that tried to grow.

We were safe for now, but I could still hear crackling along the high road. There were a lot more of them where that one came from—maybe they were swarming.

"Looks like this road's too perilous for the time being," Reggie commented as Wentworth jogged over. The knight nodded in agreement.

"But we can't simply wait around for them to migrate," Alan argued, glancing briefly at me. Was he worried that Lord Patriciél's men were after us? Was that why he felt the need to hurry? It warmed my heart to think that he was concerned for my well-being.

First he had hired me off the street, and now he was taking pains to ensure my continued safety. *What a good guy*, I thought to myself. Feeling somewhat guilty for the pressure my presence added to the situation, I offered an alternative solution.

"What if we split up? I'll go through the forest by myself." After all, barring

any extreme circumstances, I could probably get by with a dagger and some food rations—

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Are you stupid?”

“I don’t think I can agree to that.”

Unfortunately, all three of them shot me down in spectacular fashion.

“Considering how you reacted to the zapgrass, I’m not confident that you could defend yourself,” Wentworth explained. “Furthermore, this here is no ordinary forest—this is the Forest of the Thorn Princess.”

“Thorn Princess?” I repeated. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“They say she’s an ancestor to the Farzian royal family,” Reggie added helpfully. “According to legend, she’s an immortal spellcaster who uses magic to wield thorny brambles at will, and she lives right here in this forest. Supposedly, she has a deep hatred of men, and any who set foot in her domain will find their path blocked with thorns.”

Farzian princess. Thorn magic. Hatred of men. Suddenly, it hit me.

“Oh, the Pedo Princess,” I murmured to myself.

In Game-Farzia, she was a minor character—a spellcaster with the appearance of a young girl. She only allowed women to enter her forest, but as long as you had at least one female character in your party, she would assist you in battle.

When the artbook for the game was released in Japan, however, her entry concluded with “Has a penchant for small boys.” This single sentence changed her in the eyes of the players forever. “What, so she’s a pedophile?!” That was how the fanbase learned that she did not, in fact, have a hatred of men.

Later, the developers revealed that she “enjoyed watching young boys” and purposely chose a prepubescent form so as to not frighten them. But young boys rarely came along, and so the locals came to the misinformed conclusion that no men were permitted inside the forest whatsoever. Conversely, she

never attacked women, further cementing the belief that only the fairer sex was allowed entry.

“But I’m not a man, so... Oh, right.”

Just in time, I remembered another detail about the Thorn Princess: to help stave off her boredom and loneliness, she liked to keep a lot of pets. Wolves, wildcats, and even some giant rats. As such, the animals that lived in the forest were reserved exclusively as prey for her precious pets; anyone who tried to hunt for themselves would be attacked without mercy. And since men couldn’t enter, no one could exterminate her beasts. This was how the Forest of the Thorn Princess had earned a reputation for being dangerous. As a result, the locals decided that the most they could do was send women and children to gather fruit from the trees on the farthest outskirts.

Right as I was about to give up on the prospect of convincing them otherwise, however, Alan spoke up.

“What if we went the long way around? There’s a road along the outer edge, isn’t there?”

Sure enough, we could see the telltale signs of wheel tracks carving an arc around the outskirts of the forest. The previous travelers had all probably encountered the same zapgrasses and subsequently opted to navigate around the forest instead. But I couldn’t spot any zapgrasses in the shadows of the trees; maybe they needed direct sunlight for photosynthesis or something.

Thus, Alan’s suggestion was readily accepted.

As we geared up to get moving, the others insisted that I ride with Alan in the passenger carriage instead. Apparently they were worried that I would fall out again. *Great, now they think I’m some idiot who can’t even ride in a carriage properly.*

“If this place has seen enough carriage traffic to leave ruts in the ground, then clearly the high road’s been impassable for quite a while,” Reggie mused as he glanced out the window.

“I’d wager you’re correct,” Alan agreed. “This land belongs to... the House of Bertrand, I believe? You’d think they’d do something about this.”

“Perhaps they don’t much care, since nobles never need to pass through this area.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not in much of a position to tell them to get their act together.”

“Agreed.”

I sat next to Reggie, gazing out the window as the others talked politics. In my past life, I only ever saw this scenery from a bird’s-eye perspective during battles, or maybe the occasional animated cutscene, but now here it was, replicated right before my eyes.

Naturally, reality was not exactly the same as the in-game artwork; here in real life, there were piles of dead leaves and strands of withered ivy all over the place. Some sort of small animal skittered out of sight—was that a squirrel? The smallest glimpse of wildlife drove home the fact that yes, this was the real world.

As I stared vacantly out the window, I noticed one of the knights on horseback had turned to look behind us, so I followed his line of sight. And although I couldn’t get a good look from inside the carriage, I could tell that sure enough, someone was following us. Then the carriage came to a stop, and everyone realized that something was wrong.

“What’s going on?” asked Alan, frowning.

“It looks like someone’s flagged us down,” I told him.

His expression hardened further. “They’ve hailed our carriage?”

He moved to the front seat and lifted it up, revealing a cavity perhaps intended for luggage storage. He reached in and felt around for something, then lifted out a wooden board—the bottom of the storage space—transforming the cavity into a passage leading under the carriage.

“We should take every precaution. Kiara, Reggie, I want you to climb out through here and steal away deeper into the forest.”

“As long as you come for us afterward,” Reggie replied casually. Limber like a cat, he easily slid down through the passage.

I didn't quite see why Alan wanted the two of us to do this, but since it was an emergency, I obeyed nonetheless.

As my feet hit the ground, I realized that this was yet another opportunity for Reggie to see my bloomers. After all, my skirt was too bulky to fit through the passage without sliding up a bit. Fortunately, Reggie didn't even spare me a passing glance; he was crouched down low, keeping tabs on the situation unfolding around us. Relieved, I crept up beside him.

There wasn't much room under the carriage, so we were both in a sort of crawling position, and our only view was that of knights' boots and horses' hooves. We *could*, however, hear their conversation with perfect clarity.

"As I said, I felt perhaps you might have given shelter to our lost heiress."

"If we had, we would have sent word of it to the family. And yet you wish to check for yourself? Do you doubt my word, you cur?"

There was heat in Wentworth's tone, and the other person seemed to flinch in the face of it. Wentworth was fairly young, but his height and stoic countenance afforded him an intimidating presence. Plus, talking to him for too long always made my neck hurt.

"No, not at all! But as we understand it, your carriages departed the same school on the very same day, so we wondered if perhaps the young master might have seen her."

"I'm not going to waste Lord Alan's time with this nonsense. Besides, we were right there with him the entire time. If he'd seen her, surely we would have as well."

"But you cannot claim to have searched the entire school grounds, correct? Please, this is very important. Our heiress is to wed Lord Credias, relative of the queen, and the ceremony is fast approaching."

A chill shot down my spine. Despite his polite language, this other man still managed to weave a tiny threat into his statement: if something were to upset the queen, the House of Évrard might well lose their territory.

But Wentworth didn't back down. "What a coincidence. As it happens, the House of Évrard has familial ties with the king."

This was true, of course. Alan's mother, the margravine, was the king's older sister, and as such, Alan was in line to potentially inherit the throne. As such, the House of Évrard outranked the House of Credias. Still, no one in their right mind would be eager to offend the queen.

Just as I was starting to worry for Wentworth, I heard the carriage door open, followed by Alan's voice.

"Wentworth! What's going on out there? Why have we stopped?"

"My apologies, milord. This man claims to hail from the House of Patriciél. Presently, he accuses us of absconding with their young heiress."

"I beg your pardon? You'd better have good reason to make such spurious claims, lest you *sorely* regret it, you swine."

But Alan's self-important swagger seemed to have no effect on the servant of Patriciél.

"I am certainly not accusing you, milord. We simply believe it is possible she has accompanied you without your knowledge. Thus, we humbly request permission to view the interior of your carriages."

As they spoke, Reggie tugged on my sleeve. I glanced over to find that a knight was crouched down by the carriage, waving us over—evidently, the servant of Patriciél couldn't see him from that angle. Careful not to make a sound, Reggie and I crept over to the knight. There, we crawled out from under the carriage, and he indicated for us to head deeper into the forest. It seemed he wanted us to conceal ourselves in there for the time being.

Meanwhile, the servant of Patriciél started his search of the carriages. Alan had closed the curtains on the window that faced the forest, so now was our only chance to make a getaway! We slipped deeper into the shadows of the trees and concealed ourselves in a nearby shrub.

Whew... Now we're safe.

Just then, I felt a zap of static shock against my fingertips. Startled, I whipped my head around to find a single infant zapgrass, struggling to pull its roots out of the ground. Once it had finally freed itself, it started to move toward me. *Gods, no!* Moving entirely on impulse, I reached out, snatched it up, and flung it

as far as I could. *Sorry!*

Apparently, the incident in the meadow had had something of a traumatic effect on me.

Reggie stared at me in wide-eyed shock as the little zapgrass traced a perfect arc through the sky... and landed right next to the carriages. Upon impact, it began to crackle angrily; this, in turn, roused all the other zapgrasses resting quietly nearby. And as the static sparks grew louder, the horses grew restless once again.

With a whinny, they reared and took off running, their riders shouting in alarm. I heard a scream from inside one of the carriages, but I could tell it wasn't Alan, so I wasn't too worried. Once the carriages took off at the speed of light, all that remained was Wentworth, his horse, and another riderless horse frightened out of its wits.

Wentworth promptly rode into the forest. "Are you there, Your Grace?"

"Right here, Wentworth," Reggie replied as he rose to his feet.

"My deepest apologies, but for the time being, I'll need you to travel along the outskirts of the forest. I'll leave my sword here for you. Once we've got the carriages taken care of, I'll send someone to collect you. Until then, stay within the bounds of the trees."

"Understood. With a party of so few, the servant is likely to notice your absence in short order, and we don't want to raise his suspicions."

"As you command, sire."

Wentworth untied his sword from his horse, dropped it to the ground, and set off at once. Reggie walked over, picked it up, and slid it easily into the sheath affixed to his waist-cord. Evidently, he was used to handling a blade.

"Why did you stay behind?" I asked, puzzled. Everyone seemed to care about his safety a great deal, and yet they'd left him without any bodyguards.

He returned to my side, smiling brightly. "Because unlike you, I can defend myself. Besides, we couldn't possibly abandon a lone girl in the forest, now could we?"

Frankly, this didn't feel like an answer to my question. Supposing they *had* left me behind, where was the issue in doing so? Why would they be so hospitable to a "commoner" servant? Plus, they'd gone to all this trouble in the name of concealing me. Sure, maybe they were just looking to avoid causing a scandal, but in that case, why have Reggie sneak out with me?

I stared up at him, scrutinizing his face.

Back at the boarding school, I had seen him enter the building with Alan, so he seemingly had no problem showing himself to fellow teenagers. Was there a reason he ought to avoid a fully-grown manservant of a noble house?

Our boarding school was not one children attended out of some obligation. Among other reasons, oftentimes they went because their parents wanted them to foster connections to (or find marriage partners within) other noble houses; the (admittedly scant few) mixed-gender classes existed for that purpose. Someone who had no need of such a thing wouldn't bother enrolling their child at all.

Maybe he—

"Aaah!"

Out of nowhere, Reggie covered my eyes with his hands, derailing my train of thought entirely.

"What's got you so lost in thought? The longer we dawdle in one place, the more likely the beasts will find us. Let's get moving, hmm?"

He pulled his hands away from my eyes, then grabbed me by the wrist and set off walking. For some reason, the warmth of his hand against my skin made me a little nervous. It wasn't the first time he'd done so, of course—lest I remind you of the Bed Tumble incident—but perhaps I was more self-conscious now that he'd just touched my face as well.

I-I'm onto you, mister! I thought to myself, then did my best to clear my mind. If I had to guess, he'd probably noticed me staring and startled me on purpose to keep me from making any unwanted discoveries. Unfortunately for him, however, I was already convinced my hypothesis was right, and no amount of surprise would make me forget.

Unless I was mistaken, Reggie was almost certainly a member of nobility. Judging from the way Alan and the others treated him, he was no mere attendant; rather, he was simply content to play the part. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember Game-Alan having any nobleman friends his age. Parts of my memory were too fuzzy.

In my past life, I didn't bother to stop and notice the small details; I was too focused on beating the game as quickly as possible. I could remember the main plot points, who I put in my party, and even where I placed my knights, but everything else was a total blur. I must have skipped through more than half the dialogue in the entire game—anything to get to the next battle that much faster.

As far as I could recall, Game-Alan's allies were mainly middle-aged men or world-weary young adults...

While the gears turned in my head, Reggie led me a bit further into the forest, probably to ensure we couldn't be seen from the road. And we couldn't risk being caught out in the open in the event the servant of Patriciél decided to retrace his steps back here. Thus, I followed along without complaint.

This was one of the few times in my life that I'd ever walked through a forest. I'd gone hiking in my past life, sure, but now I lived in a world where electric grass was a thing I had to worry about.

Fortunately, someone like me was in good hands with a knowledgeable guy like Reggie as my guide. At one point I spotted a peculiar plant; right as I touched it, however, Reggie yanked hard on my wrist and dragged me away at the speed of light.

"Why... would you try... to touch something... when you don't know... if it's safe?!" he panted, once we had put a safe distance between ourselves and the plant.

"I-I'm sorry..."

The plant in question was wrapped around a tree like ivy, with grape-like fruits hanging from it. Truth be told, I had been lured in by the sweet, mouthwatering smell. Thankfully, Reggie noticed just in time and pulled me back right as the "grapes" burst open, emitting a strange purple gas.

“That gas... is toxic. Not lethal, but... it makes your body numb.”

“Yikes.” That sounded like a perfect recipe to end up as some predator’s dinner. “Th-Thanks for saving my bacon,” I stammered through gasps for air. Ever since we first met, it felt like I’d done nothing but apologize over one thing or another.

“Just be more careful next time,” he sighed.

He could have criticized me for being stupid, or called me a burden, but instead he forgave me. Now, if the count was here, he would’ve thrown whatever was on hand at the time and shouted something like “If you want to keep living in the lap of luxury, then you’d better start listening to me!”

After all that running, plus the copious amounts of screaming, my throat was parched. Right as I wished I had some water, however, I heard a familiar crackle and glanced around.

“Are there zapgrasses in the forest, too?”

Reggie scanned our surroundings; evidently he’d heard it, too. His eyes must have been sharper than mine, however, because he spotted the source right away.

“Over there.”

Hand in hand, we moved in the direction of the sound. There, we found...

“Water!”

There was a slight depression in the earth that served as the basin for a waterfall trickling down over the rocks. And for some reason, a large group of zapgrasses was huddled in a semicircle around the water. It was kind of cute, actually.

“Oh, I get it. The population is outpacing the size of their territory, so they’re trying to expand.”

“Wait, what? So they’re going to start chopping down trees, or what?”

To me, it just looked like they were having a good time.

“First, they start by locating a water source. Then they build a community

around it. And as their numbers increase, they'll start scorching the trees to bring in more sunlight. That's how they cultivate their habitat, or so I'm told. Admittedly, this is my first time seeing it in person."

"But if they started burning trees in the middle of a forest, wouldn't they run the risk of causing a forest fire? You'd think they'd know better than to endanger themselves like that."

I knew they did their scorching with electricity, not actual fire, but still—those burns would retain heat, deep in the ashes. If the scorched tree toppled over onto something flammable, like dead grass or leaves, it could very well catch fire.

"That's partly what the water's for. They spray it around at regular intervals in order to use it as a fire retardant. That said, it's not always a hundred percent effective. And on the off chance a fire *does* break out, yes, the zapgrasses will go up in flames with it."

Sounds like risky business. Poor little things.

"When you think about it, they're destroying the habitat for the other animals, aren't they?"

"Mm-hmm," Reggie replied offhandedly.

"In that case, we should probably get them out of here."

He blinked at me in surprise. "How? If I attack them with the sword, their electricity will make my hand go numb."

I giggled mischievously. *Well, we've got some electricity, and we've got some water... I think it's time for a little science experiment.*

If all went according to plan, we'd have access to a whole waterfall of fresh spring water, no boiling necessary—and I was very, very thirsty.

First order of business: locate a large rock. The first one I found was light enough that I could carry it, but it was covered in moss, so I decided to keep looking. The next rock I found was smaller than the first, but its surface was nice and dry. Then I tied some ivy around it—plump and soft, but still firm enough that it could keep the rock suspended without tearing.

With the rock in my arms, I approached a tree near the waterfall. The zapgrasses noticed me approaching and crackled aggressively to keep me at bay, but otherwise stayed put. Holding tight to one end of the ivy, I started swinging the rock over my head like a lasso. And when I let go, the momentum carried it all the way into the basin with a tremendous *SPLASH*, spraying all the zapgrasses.

“That was perhaps... a bit more effective than I was expecting.”

The waterfall basin was now surrounded by the ashen corpses of the zapgrass herd; they fell apart like charcoal at the slightest touch. The water exposure had turned their bodies into conduits for their electricity, frying them from the inside out. Reflexively, I pressed my hands together in prayer.

“Rest in peace, little ones.”

Once they were safely on their way to the afterlife, I reached out and scooped up some of that sweet, sweet spring water. *Ahhh, cold and refreshing.*

“Want some water?” I asked Reggie. But when I turned back to look at him, I found him staring at me—not in confusion, but *sheer disbelief*. For a moment he didn’t respond to my question... but then he finally let out a chuckle. This laughter persisted even after he’d drunk his fill.

“You said the count adopted you, right? Were you born to commoners, then? Daughter of a knight, perhaps?” he asked me once he’d settled down.

Evidently, my behavior was deemed ill-fitting of a true noble. But I had no reason to hide my past from him, so I decided to be honest.

“Baronet, actually. We were commoners in all but name.”

“But you owned some land, at least?”

When it came to landed nobility, those with the title of baronet were at the very bottom of the totem pole. Similar to the way a wealthy magnate might pay to have a sports dome or other facility named in their honor, baronets received their titles in exchange for money donated to the royal coffers.

“Technically yes, but we’d been selling it off in chunks for years and years. That said, it didn’t seem like we were doing it out of necessity, but I can’t say for

sure.” After all, it was all just hearsay and conjecture.

If we were truly that poor, then surely we would have laid off our servants or stopped buying silk gowns every season. Instead, our decline was gradual, with one fewer servant every six months or so. Hence, they’d been more than happy to sell me off to a noble.

“Is Kiara your birth name?”

“It is. Supposedly it was given to me by my mother, but she passed away before I learned to read or write.”

Seeing as Reggie was so interested in me all of a sudden, I decided now was as good a time as any for a little break. I sat down on a dry, weathered log, and Reggie took a seat right next to me. Internally, I bristled. After all, we were both teenagers; didn’t he feel even the slightest bit shy, sitting so close to a girl?

Then again, in my current life, I’d barely had any social interaction with boys my own age. My stepmother had kept me locked up in the house in my early years, and after the count adopted me, he kept me far away from any of the servants. Even when I was enrolled in boarding school, almost everyone I interacted with was female. There were no coed parties or anything of the sort.

You know, after everything I’ve been through, it’s a miracle I didn’t end up with PTSD. Maybe I have my otherworld memories to thank for that.

“You haven’t told us much about your birth family. Your late mother aside, I suppose the rest of them weren’t very good to you, were they?”

Somehow, Reggie was able to read between the lines with perfect clarity. It was a relief, actually, to hear him describe my home life with such unflattering honesty. After all, the majority of people were firmly convinced that all families loved each other deep down, and they refused to accept the possibility that there were exceptions to the rule.

Even the nobles who were raised predominantly by their nannies were still somehow under the conception that families always “do what’s best for you” — that their love was unconditional. And they were downright *desperate* to avoid having to challenge this belief. *I’m sure your father loves you*, they’d all say. *After all, you’re his daughter. Nothing can break those familial ties.*

Naturally, I was expecting Reggie to say something along the same lines, but he didn't. That said, while this came as a refreshing change, I couldn't help but think that perhaps there was a reason he understood me as well as he did...

"You must have some unkind family members of your own, don't you, Reggie?" I asked.

He smiled softly. "It's nice to find someone who understands what it's like."

Just like that, it felt as though the two of us had forged a real connection. He was quite possibly the only person I'd ever met who could comprehend the trauma of my past. Not that I knew for sure if *he* felt the same way, of course, but still...

"I'd like to hear more about you, if you wouldn't mind."

I got the sense that he cared about me, even just a little.

But right in the middle of this touching little moment...

"Oh dear. Perhaps I shouldn't have interrupted."

Out of nowhere, a figure appeared on the other side of the waterfall basin—a small girl with glossy silver hair that hung straight down to her hips. She wore a dark red robe that descended to her ankles, and her violet eyes sparkled like jewels. I swallowed hard as her pale pink lips twitched upon the porcelain canvas of her countenance.

I hadn't even heard her approaching.

"Those grasses have been a real pain in my neck, trying to invade my forest," she explained casually, as though we were old friends catching up. "I don't care if they've overpopulated the meadow! I can't have them burning up all my trees—or my pets, for that matter!"

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I blinked—once, twice, three times. But she was still standing there.

"The Thorn Princess..."

Indeed, it was she. After all, who else could possibly retain such a flawless air of dignity, living alone in a forest? I never gave it much thought in my past life, but now that I could smell the musk of dead leaves, her presence here was a

jarring mismatch.

The more I looked at her, the more I dearly wished I could reapply my makeup, or at least brush my hair. God knows it was still filthy from the time I got thrown out of the carriage. Fortunately, my black school uniform concealed dirt stains fairly well, but there were still dead leaves stuck to my skirt. I hastily brushed myself off.

Meanwhile, the Thorn Princess looked at me in surprise. *What?*

“You know of me?” she asked.

Then, finally, I understood. Clearly she wasn’t expecting a total stranger such as myself to know her name. Thinking quickly, I blurted out the first excuse that came to mind.

“W-Well, I heard that the Thorn Princess dwells in this forest... and you kinda showed up out of nowhere, so I just assumed...”

“Hmm? From the way you looked at me, I was sure you recognized my face.”

“No, no, not at all!”

Judging from the look on her face, she wasn’t completely convinced... but at the very least, she didn’t press further. Perhaps she decided it would be strange for me to recognize her, seeing as we had never met.

Then she glanced from me to Reggie and sucked in a breath.

Oh crap! He’s outside her preferred age range!

“Hey, uh, just so you know, he’s only twelve! He’s just really tall for his age!”

Unsurprisingly, Reggie shot me a look that said, *What on earth are you talking about?*

I tried my best to reply with my eyes. *Look, I know it’s weird, okay?! But you saved my life, so I can’t have her throwing you out of the forest!*

The Thorn Princess stared at me for a long, calculating moment. “You *do* know me from somewhere, don’t you?”

I flinched. *Crap, that’s right! No one in this world is supposed to know that she likes watching little boys!*

“No, I really don’t! I just... surmised as much from the rumors, that’s all!”

“What sort of rumors?”

“Well, they say you only allow women and young children into your forest, so I figured you must not be a fan of teenage boys, am I right? Hahahaha...”

I laughed uneasily. Unfortunately, this did little to resolve the situation.

“So you assumed the mere sight of this boy would fill me with rage? Is that why you specified that he was twelve?”

“Well, any older and it wouldn’t *technically* count as pedo—I mean, I was just concerned that you might mistake him for older than he really is! He gets that a lot, you know!”

As I scrambled for a plausible excuse, the Thorn Princess gazed at me for another long moment. Then, slowly, her lips curled in a faint smile.

“I see... Now I understand.”

My heart nearly stopped. Her sinister expression was made all the more terrifying by her youthful appearance.

“Very well. Anyway, I came to say thank you for exterminating those zapgrasses; you’ve saved me some time and effort. So, are you trying to get through the forest?”

Apparently, my actions had inadvertently won her favor.

“Well, you see, we’ve... been separated from our group, I guess? But there’s a man with them that we’d really rather avoid, so we’re traveling separately for now... and we have to stay within the bounds of the forest so he can’t spot us.”

“Are you really the Thorn Princess?” Reggie asked suddenly, and I tensed up, fearful that his deep, masculine voice would provoke her anger.

“Indeed, I have been watching over this nation since its founding,” she answered quietly, still smiling. “Does my childlike form give you pause? Rest assured, it is only a guise. One I have worn for centuries.”

As it turned out, the Thorn Princess was surprisingly affable. Had she bought my claim that Reggie was only twelve? Puzzled as I was, I decided it would be

best to let sleeping dogs lie. It was time for us to go our separate ways.

“Well, we’re in a bit of a hurry, so we’ll be going now!”

With my otherworld memories in the forefront of my mind, I bowed to her in proper Japanese fashion before turning to leave.

“When you say ‘your group,’ are you referring to the two vehicles about a hundred meters ahead? Passenger carriage and luggage carriage, right?”

“Huh? How did you know that?”

She snickered. “I see all that approaches my forest. That is how I deal with ruffians who would lay waste to my home.”

I pictured a giant home security camera peeking through the trees, surveilling all visitors. Naturally, home security didn’t exist in this world, and so Reggie was rather taken aback.

“You know everything that happens here?”

“Of course. What of it?” she replied offhandedly. “I can see outside the forest, too. I know what sort of person the king has married, I know of her homeland, and I know exactly what will happen to the people living in the castle town. I wouldn’t mind telling you, of course... for a price.”

Reggie’s expression grew tense, though I didn’t understand why. Was it something she said?

“Well, uh, we’d better be on our way!”

Somehow I got the feeling I needed to separate these two ASAP. I gave Reggie a little push, and he seemed to snap back to his senses. With a stiff smile, he waved goodbye and walked off. But before I could follow...

“Just a moment, you.”

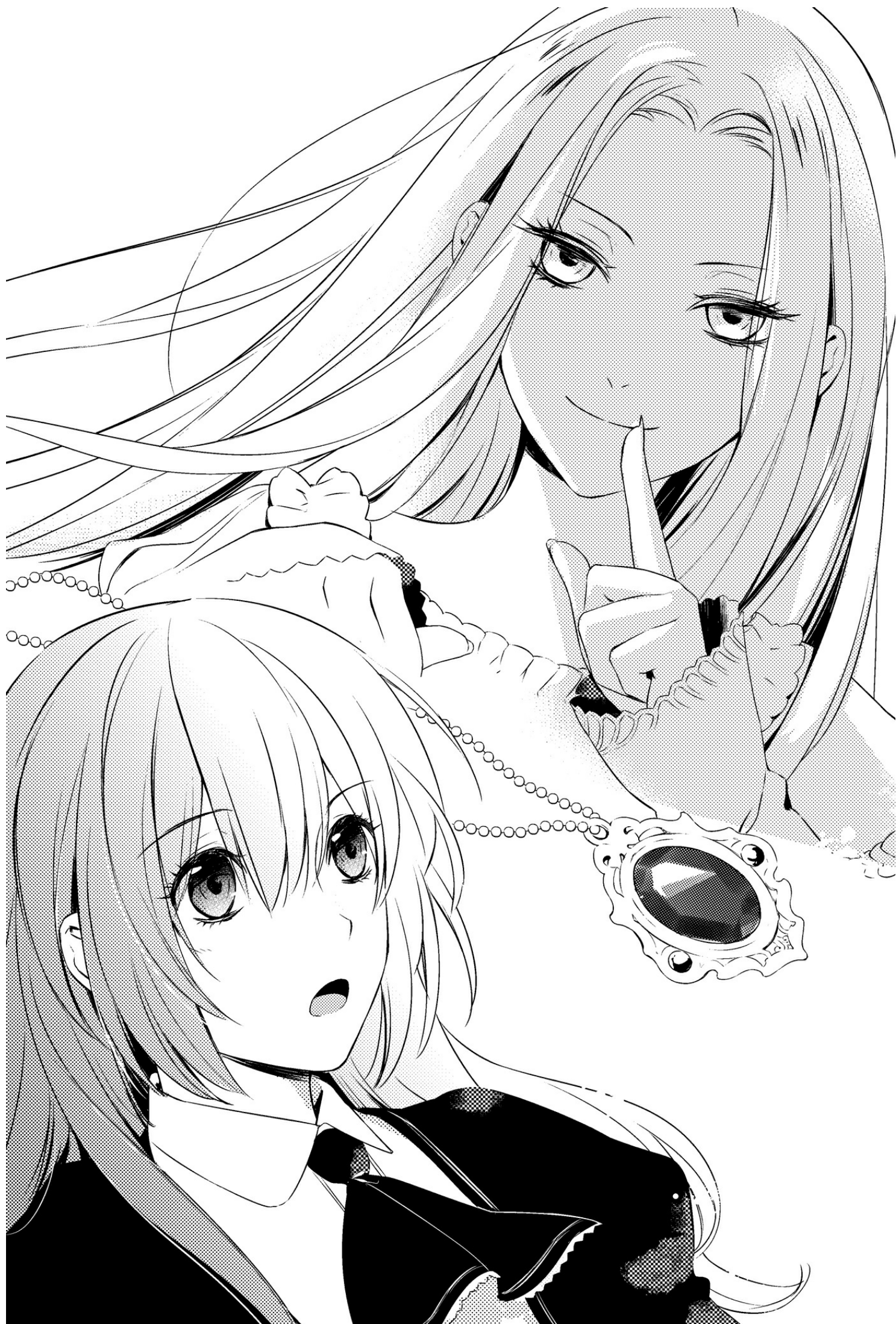
Her cold fingers brushed my hand. Startled, I whirled around to find her standing right next to me. *What the... She can teleport?!*

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“K-Kiara,” I replied hastily.

The Thorn Princess held out a necklace and pressed it into my palm. Attached

to the chain was a small, round pendant made of what looked like red frosted glass mixed with a darker, more sinister color at the edges. If someone had told me this item was cursed, I would have believed them.



“This is a special gift just for you. Don’t lose it... or else.”

“*What?!*”

Why are you giving me this terrifying object?! Now it DEFINITELY sounds cursed! I don’t want this!

At the same time, if I tried to give it back, I had a feeling she would get angry and trap me in the forest with her brambles.

After a moment of hesitation, I awkwardly accepted the necklace, then got out of there as fast as my legs could carry me. At the time, I didn’t understand why she wanted me to have it.

I wouldn’t learn the truth until two years later.



Later that day, Reggie and I safely reunited with the rest of our traveling party. Once we were seated back in the passenger carriage, Reggie asked Alan what we’d missed while we were gone.

“Tell me, did you give that servant the slip? Or dump his body in a ditch, perhaps?” The silver-haired boy grinned, his tone light and conversational.

As for Alan, he didn’t even bat an eye. “I *was* rather hoping he might fall out of the carriage, seeing as the door was still open when we took off, but alas. On the bright side, it meant he had to walk all the way back on foot to retrieve his horse. Fortunately, he seemed convinced Kiara wasn’t with us, but I admit I was terrified that he might cross paths with you two during his search.”

Reggie nodded cheerfully. “Understandable! As for us, we had ourselves a peaceful little nature walk. I imagine the man was too distracted by the commotion to look too closely at the forest.”

“What made the zapgrasses go off like that, anyway?”

At this, I raised my hand to answer. “Oh, um... because I threw one of them, probably.”

Alan stared at me. “You *threw one*?! It didn’t burn you, did it?!”

“It did zap me a little, but it didn’t really hurt tha—whoa!”

Out of nowhere, he leaned forward and seized my hands in his. Once he finished scrutinizing my palms, he let go with a sigh of relief.

“Sure enough, you seem completely unscathed.”

“It was a reflexive reaction to get it away from me, that’s all. And it was just a baby anyway.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, you’re a young lady. We can’t have you scarring up your body,” he declared firmly.

I faltered. *Rrgh, you stupid protagonist! A minor NPC like me doesn’t stand a chance against your chivalry!*

Instead, I stared at the floor. “Right.”

Gallant as he was, I couldn’t foresee myself falling in love with him, possibly because of all the times I had Game-Alan kill Game-Kiara in my past life... or because I was afraid I might still die at his hand here in the real world.

Meanwhile, Alan turned back to Reggie. “So, what took you two so long?”

“Oh, well, we had a bit of a run-in with the Thorn Princess,” Reggie replied offhandedly.

“You *what?!* ” Alan shrieked, nearly jumping to his feet. “Damn it, Reggie! You didn’t get yourself hurt, did you? I’ve heard stories of that witch whipping men to death with her thorny brambles!”

“Do I look dead? No? Then there you go.”

Alan shot him a dubious look, but didn’t press further. After all, it was obvious at a glance that Reggie was unharmed.

“I guess some rumors are wildly overblown,” Alan muttered. “So, what was she like?”

“Well, she looked like a tiny little girl, maybe a few years younger than us. But she *claimed* to be much, much older.”

Evidently, Alan’s interest had shifted to the Thorn Princess.

As the conversation continued, before we knew it, we had arrived at our stopover for the night.



The rest of our journey was entirely uneventful, with no signs of any other pursuers. Five days later, we had finally crossed into Évrard territory... and two days after that, the margrave's castle came into view, situated atop a distant hill. Its walls were tall and sturdy, like a fortress—quite fitting for a noble house tasked with border patrol.

At the bottom of the hill was a vast, sprawling forest. Judging from the size of the trees, I could roughly estimate the size of the forest itself, and from there I determined that the castle grounds were fairly expansive as well.

This was the place where Alan was born, and where countless battles had been fought.

“Now that you'll be serving at our estate, there are some things you'll need to know,” Alan announced.

From there, he explained the margraviate's current state of affairs.

The province of Évrard shared a border with Llewyrne to the east, as well as the kingdom of Salekhard to the north. Due to frequent international scuffles, the king had appointed the margrave to the post of army general. Thus, any time there was an emergency, he was free to request backup from neighboring territories and subsequently take command of those armies.

As it turned out, Alan had returned home from school not in response to an emergency situation, but rather the lack thereof.

Until recently, Évrard had struggled with a group of bandits sneaking over from Llewyrne. At one point, the ruffians had set fire to a mansion outside the castle grounds, and things were looking rather unsafe for the residents. Because the bandits were few in number and traveled separately, Évrard soldiers had had a hell of a time tracking them down.

Some feared that these criminals were in fact scouts sent by Llewyrne forces. Because of the safety risk this posed to the family, Alan had been “evacuated” to the boarding school on the other side of the country.

“Not because I'm weak or anything, mind you! They just didn't want the whole family cooped up in one place. You know, in the event of a tragedy,” Alan

clarified, and I got the sense he resented being whisked away from his home. *Whatever you say, buddy.* I was tempted to explain to him that his parents were just worried for his safety, but I didn't want to risk upsetting him.

Looking back, he had always been the hot-headed sort of protagonist. Fighting was his solution to everything—in the RPG, anyway. Then again, that was the whole point of playing the game in the first place.

Just then, I remembered how Alan's father had died in the prologue. The castle had been attacked, and Alan was only spared because he was elsewhere at the time...

Wait, what?

It felt like I was on the cusp of a breakthrough about something... but I couldn't exactly tune Alan out, so I decided to revisit the subject at a later time.

"To be clear, it's my understanding that they've captured all the bandits, so there shouldn't be an issue. Still, be on guard if ever you're asked to leave the castle grounds. Setting aside the situation with Lord Patriciél, Llewyne is just a stone's throw away from here. Danger could be anywhere."

"Understood," I nodded.

Next, Alan told me about his mother. She was the elder sister of the king, a fact I already knew, and she patrolled the border almost every day. *Wait... So the margravine is a soldier, too?!*

When he told me his mother might ask me to accompany her around the territory, I paled. Then Reggie explained how the margravine might need to keep me close at hand to supervise me, since I was a daughter of nobility. *Oh god, I don't think I have the physical endurance for that!*

"Can't I serve her from *inside* the castle?" I asked in a small voice.

"Yeah... I don't think you're athletic enough to serve as an attendant," Alan mused. *Why would an attendant need to be athletic at all?!*

While I agonized over my future employment, we pulled up to the castle gates.

As it turned out, the stone walls were a lot more rugged than they were

depicted in-game. The gates slowly opened to reveal a plot of land large enough for perhaps a thousand people to run around freely, and on the other end of that space was the margrave's castle, with towers and everything. Standing between us and the castle was a large group of people—here to welcome the young master, if I had to guess.

On each side of the walkway was a row of servants, their uniforms so gray and drab that they threatened to blend in with the castle walls. In the center stood a middle-aged man in a dark green coat, his hair and facial features a perfect match for his son's, give or take the age gap. Yes, this was almost certainly Margrave Vayne Évrard in the flesh.

Next to the margrave was a silver-haired woman in a modest yellow-green dress: Margravine Beatrice Évrard, elder sister to the king of Farzia. Behind her stood two female attendants, both older than me by the looks of it, as well as tall and... carrying swords?! I couldn't be sure if they were hired for their skills or trained on the job, but either way, I could see that everything Alan had told me about his mother was indeed the truth. Lady Évrard was smaller in stature compared to her husband, but she had the athletic build of a runner.

As the carriages came to a stop, the knights helped Alan, Reggie, and I deboard. I positioned myself behind Alan, content to wait quietly until I was addressed directly. Just then, Reggie walked in front of Alan for some reason... and the entire welcoming party bent the knee in genuflection.

"We're so glad to have you back safe and sound, Your Highness."

Why is the margrave kneeling?! And what do you mean, "Your Highness"?!

"Thank you for tolerating my selfish demands, my good man," Reggie replied as if this were the most commonplace event in the world. "I should like to remain at your castle for a bit longer."

My jaw dropped. He was clearly speaking to the margrave as his superior! Then Wentworth leaned forward and whispered in my ear.

"Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Tell me *what*?!" I hissed back.

Wentworth fixed me with a sympathetic look. "The 'Reggie' you've been

traveling with? That's His Highness Prince Reginald of Farzia."

I clapped both hands over my open mouth to muffle the scream that was clawing its way up my throat.

Then something else floated to the forefront of my mind: images of the RPG's opening cutscene, the margrave's castle in ruins, the ground scattered with corpses. Among the bodies was one of Alan's dearest friends: Prince Reginald, who had come as a representative of Farzia to hold a conference with the kingdom of Salekhard to discuss their current crisis. The margrave died shielding the prince from a blow, while His Highness died from an arrow to the back. Plus, he *did* have silver hair in the game...

Meanwhile, the real "Prince Reginald" was smirking at me over his shoulder, openly savoring my utter shock. He probably avoided telling me on purpose so he could make me look like an idiot in front of everyone, and if I was going to play along, this is the part where I would scowl and pout... but I was too distracted by the horrible things I'd just remembered.

Reggie, the friend I'd made over the course of our long journey, the boy currently grinning at me like a smug jerk, was fated to lose his life at an early age. Was there *anything* I could possibly do about it?

The game's opening cinematic was only two or three minutes long at most. It started with an overview of Farzia as a whole, then zoomed in on the battle at Évrard Castle to set the tone for the plot. There, the soldiers were overrun, the gates were destroyed, and the enemy soldiers charged in. There was a brief shot of the prince and the margrave fighting side by side, but this was quickly followed by their death scene. Then Alan turned up—just a moment too late to save them.

None of that sounded like something I could prevent.

Alan was only spared because he had gone off to lead an army against what turned out to be a diversionary attack. Having lost both his father and his friends, he would fight to reclaim Farzia while simultaneously seeking revenge against Llewyne. And Reggie was among those friends he lost.

Could I somehow keep Reggie from visiting during that time? I thought about it for a moment, but quickly decided it was impossible. After all, the whole

purpose of his visit was to represent Farzia in a conference with another kingdom; no one else could possibly take his place. It was all a careful ploy by the nation of Llewyrne.

In that case, could I have Reggie leave the castle with Alan somehow? No, surely the margrave would never permit the prince of Farzia to join his son's army. If anything, that might put Alan at greater risk, since the prince would be comparatively more accessible on the battlefield. And if they *both* died, then it truly was "game over" for our country.

Terror gripped me as I realized there was nothing I could do to stop these deaths from happening.

"Kiara?" Reggie called, sounding concerned.

"Oh, um, sorry!"

When I snapped back to my senses, I found that everyone was staring at me. A cold sweat dripped down my back. Had someone asked me a question while I was distracted? None of them seemed especially angry with me... Hopefully I hadn't let the silence linger for too terribly long. *Whew*. Now to focus on reality for a while.

"Who is this girl, Your Highness?"

"We picked her up during our journey. On that note, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, Margrave," Reggie explained, flicking his eyes in the direction of the castle—a silent suggestion to move this party indoors. His Lordship seemed to pick up on this, because he turned and led us all into the castle.

There, we entered one of the towers in the far corner of the building and began to climb the stairs. Once we reached the third floor, the murmurs of the people below us grew faint, and with nothing but empty air directly outside the windows, the risk of eavesdroppers was greatly reduced. The remaining chance was then eliminated with a single guard posted outside the door.

We all crammed ourselves into the small room at the top of the tower: Lord and Lady Évrard, Alan, Reggie, Wentworth, and myself.

"I take it there are some... sensitive circumstances?" asked His Lordship.

Reggie and Alan both nodded.

“She’s the adopted daughter of Lord Patriciél,” Reggie explained.

The margrave furrowed his brow, probably because the House of Évrard wasn’t on especially good terms with the count.

“Then why bring her here?”

“She seeks to escape a marriage with Lord Credias... and as it happens, we have proof of such an engagement. Furthermore, Patriciél anticipated her opposition and laced his correspondence with a sleeping-draught. By the time we found her, she was completely sedated.”

“You’re certain of that fact?” His Lordship asked.

Alan, Reggie, and Wentworth all looked away awkwardly. Embarrassed, I stared at the floor.

“Is it alright with you if I tell him?” Reggie asked me. Truth be told, I wasn’t enthusiastic about the prospect, but if it meant the margrave would be convinced of my innocence, then I would just have to bite back my tears.

“Kiara here boarded Alan’s luggage carriage in order to escape the boarding school. We believe the sedative kicked in shortly thereafter, because when we found her, no amount of shouting or shaking would rouse her. Frankly, we only discovered her because she was talking in her sleep.”

“She was sleep-talking?”

Reggie nodded solemnly. “She didn’t wake up until nearly noon the next day, and without realizing she was drugged, she immediately offered her apologies as well as travel fare. But when she rose to retrieve her wallet, her legs were completely numb, and she fell to the floor.”

Mortified, I clutched my skirt in my fists until my knuckles went white. Still, this conversation directly pertained to my immediate future, so I needed to pay attention to the margrave’s reaction. Summoning all my courage, I snuck a glance in His Lordship’s direction... and found him looking at me with the utmost pity in his eyes.

“Is this true, Wentworth?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I witnessed the entire thing, and it all happened exactly as His Highness says. Furthermore, as we were hailed by a man who claimed to serve the count, it’s safe to say he *is*, in fact, looking for her.”

Lord Évrard let out a heavy sigh. “So you decided to take this disa—*distressed* young lady with you, did you?”

Was he about to call me a disappointment? No, it’s fine. I don’t care if he insults me. I would endure anything if it meant he would trust me.

Behind him, Lady Évrard stood with her lips pursed... though the corners of her mouth were twitching. *She’s suppressing a laugh, isn’t she? Ugh, fine. Better than her deciding she hates me. Are ALL nobles a bunch of gigglers like Reggie? Is this aristocratic culture?*

Meanwhile, Alan tried to spin the whole thing as a positive development. “Call it an act of charity if you will, but the thought of leaving this young girl to her fate made me sick to my stomach. She says she has no love for her adoptive father, and she doesn’t care if we treat her as a commoner, so... I was thinking we might employ her here at the castle.”

“Take her in as a servant?” Lord Évrard mused. “Are you sure you can tolerate such indignity, my lady?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely! My birth father was a mere baronet, you see, and his second wife gave me maids’ tasks all the time. I can cook, clean, peel potatoes, you name it!”

I tried to keep my tone as cheery as possible, but Wentworth and the Évrards all looked at me with sympathy nonetheless. Almost like they were seated in the audience at a Shakespearean tragedy. *Sorry... I guess my history IS pretty depressing.*

Truth be told, I didn’t really want the Évrards to know my dark past. They seemed like a normal, loving family, and I knew it would pain them to learn of my suffering. But I couldn’t very well lie to them, and if I wanted to ensure I wouldn’t end up dead or an enemy of the state, then I was better off staying here. *Especially* if I wanted to try to keep Reggie and Alan alive!

In order to achieve that, however, I would need to find a way to change

Reggie's fate. The most feasible idea I could think of would be to change classes to a spellcaster like Game-Kiara, except... you know... *not* an enemy character. Maybe then I could help fight off the invading troops.

How, then, would I go about making myself into a spellcaster? Frankly, I had no idea where to begin... but if I was going to look into it, it couldn't hurt to have the backing of a noble house in my endeavors.

"Tell me, dear. Can you use a sword?" Lady Évrard asked me.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine someone would ask this of a delicate fourteen-year-old girl in the Farzian equivalent of a job interview. Coming from the margravine, however, I wasn't that surprised. Her attendants from earlier definitely looked like they were hired for their brawn. Either way, the answer was no, so I shook my head.

"Any self-defense training?"

"My adoptive father wanted me to serve at the royal palace, so he taught me knife combat, but not much else."

"I see." Her Ladyship nodded, then touched her husband's shoulder. "I want her to work for me."

"As an attendant?"

"Mm-hmm. You remember how Ronat had to leave her post after she got married the other day? My other girls can handle the outdoor work, so I could use at least one with proper etiquette training."

At this, Alan's expression brightened, and Reggie's smile deepened. Come to think of it, Reggie was the only one who didn't grimace during my sob story. It was nice to have at least one person who could listen without wincing.

"So you'll hire her?" Alan asked.

The margrave nodded. "I admit, my wife could certainly find a use for someone with a noble's sensibilities, since we don't get a lot of those out here. We're happy to have you, Miss Kiara."

"Thank you, Your Lordship," I replied with a curtsy.

"That said, our territory serves as the cornerstone of Farzia's border defense.

As such, we'll need to hone your running endurance so you can be prepared for any possible emergency situation," Lady Évrard explained.

At this, my heart nearly stopped. This woman wanted me to exercise, and I was decidedly *not* the athletic type.

I really hope I'll have time to research spellcasting...

Chapter 2: The Path to Sorcery

And so I was hired as an attendant to the margravine of Évrard, at which time my name was formally changed to Kiara Cordier.

Looking back, my life thus far had been one hell of a roller coaster. First I was born to a baronet, then I was adopted by a count, then I nearly became a viscountess, and now I served a margrave.

As for my name change, they explained to me that only highborn women could take a job as an attendant, and so we agreed we would tell everyone that I was born to the Cordier family, distant relatives of the House of Évrard—a small branch family, as I was told, who made their living as sheep farmers down in the mountains to the south of the province.

One week had passed since I was first hired. My daily duties involved waking the margravine, offering her water as needed, then accompanying her to her morning training session; while she practiced her sword swings, I was to run ten laps around the courtyard.

Then, after she'd had her breakfast, I saw her off as she departed for morning patrols. Only then was I permitted to have breakfast myself. On my first day, I was too exhausted to eat a single bite, but after a full week of this new routine, I had finally adjusted to it.

Other servants were in charge of cleaning her room, so I was basically done for the day—or so I thought, but then I was tasked with covering a shift for Prince Reginald's lords-in-waiting. This was part of an ongoing arrangement I had requested of Reggie directly.

When I arrived at his room, he came out to meet me. Together, we and a few knight-guards from the castle town all headed to the library in the west wing of the margrave's estate.

Compared to the boarding school library, this one was far more sophisticated. Tall bookshelves lined the chestnut-colored wooden walls, with pillars spaced

evenly apart to support multiple mezzanine floors. Between each bookshelf was a small window—probably for ventilation purposes—but they were all covered with wooden shutters. The only light was that of the candlesticks on the large table in the center.

On the day we first arrived at the margrave's estate, I'd asked Reggie if he could help me gain access to the castle library so I could "look into something." Truth be told, I really wasn't sure how to go about asking him; after all, if I flat-out said I wanted to study spellcasting, he might suspect me of ill intentions—and that was the *last* thing I wanted! But at the same time, I couldn't exactly pretend to have a purely scholarly interest in the subject.

Then I remembered the gift the Thorn Princess had given to me in parting: the necklace with the red glass pendant. She had expressly ordered me not to lose it; maybe there was some sort of hex cast upon it? Thus, I decided to use the necklace as a pretext for my research.

When I relayed my wishes to Reggie, he seemed hesitant, but ultimately agreed to help me. Maybe he decided the necklace *was* in fact potentially dangerous, considering who it came from. Regardless, with the "cursed pendant" as my excuse, I was free to walk straight over to the sorcery section of the library with no guilt on my conscience... but I had no idea the prince himself was going to help me look!

And so, over the past few days, we'd visited the library religiously. I figured I could get away with stopping by once every other day or so, but Reggie insisted on accompanying me as frequently as possible so I could make up for lost time spent working for the margravine. Maybe I'd leaned a little too hard into the cursed necklace charade and inadvertently convinced him I was frightened... I felt bad for lying to him. Still, I was trying to save his life, so I hoped he would forgive me someday.

Candlestick holder in hand, I traversed the dim library and scanned the shelves. Unsurprisingly, there was no *Spellcasting For Dummies* in the margrave's collection nor any sort of reference books. All I could do was pore over the history records for any mention of events involving spellcasters.

Unfortunately, the only references I found were all described in the abstract:

“then the rivers ran backward” or “at once, the forest turned to flame,” like something I might have read in the Bible in my past life. *You’d think history books would stick to the facts, but apparently not.*

I checked to see if there were possibly any memoirs penned by spellcasters of yore, but no, that would have been too convenient. Instead, I found a journal from one of the margrave’s predecessors on the second floor. In it were a few curious passages:

x/xx

16 gold coins and 6 kilograms of actinolite ore paid to Spellcaster Rophan.

Services rendered: extermination of the tree-fairy that’s plagued us as of late.

x/xx

32 gold coins and 18 kilograms of indigo ore paid to Spellcaster Rophan.

Services rendered: emergency flood damage prevention.

Such heavy rains are uncommon lately. Once the weather clears, I must go and assess any damage done to the farming towns.

Evidently this margrave had used his journal as a ledger of sorts, and he appeared to be on good terms with a spellcaster named Rophan. Every now and then there were entries logging Rophan’s assistance with natural disasters, monster attacks, and even military battles. In return, the margrave paid him partially in ore for some reason that wasn’t clear to me. Maybe spellcasters used it in their spells?

Unfortunately, these entries were far too brief for me to make heads or tails of it, and worse, there were too few of them. I only had a limited amount of time per day that I could dedicate to reading, and it would take me an eternity to comb through this entire tome to look for more.

“Your Highness, it’s time for lunch,” announced Mabel, Reggie’s attendant, from the doorway. At fifty-seven years old, Mabel was a warm, gentle woman; paired with her full figure, she struck me as a grandmotherly sort. “You shan’t

need to accompany His Lordship today, as he's been summoned to inspect a detainee, or so I'm told."

Reggie closed his book with a frown. "Why ask the margrave to do it? Is it the bandits' ringleader or something?"

Mabel took the book from him and returned it to its shelf. "Apparently, they've caught a defective spellcaster. Rare specimen, that. The local sheriff didn't have the first clue what to do with him."

A spellcaster?! I nearly jumped to my feet and shouted Let me talk to him! Even if he was a "defective" spellcaster, surely he could use magic—otherwise, why would anyone arrest him? In which case, he could tell me how he got started on the path to sorcery!

Reggie must have read my mind somehow. "Could I see him for myself?" he inquired casually.

Of course, I was certain Mabel would say no. After all, they could hardly risk exposing the prince of Farzia to a dangerous spellcaster, captive or otherwise. And yet, beyond all my expectations, Mabel responded without missing a beat:

"I'll confirm it with His Lordship, just to be sure. But first I'll need you to run along to the dining hall for your lunch!"

"Understood. Thanks in advance."

What the... You're not going to stop him?!

Baffled, I nevertheless accompanied His Highness to the dining hall—after all, I was still technically filling in for his other attendants. Once I had safely escorted him there, I entered the room next to the kitchen, which served as a separate dining area for servants. Per Mabel's instructions, I planned to grab a quick lunch while I was here.

I didn't want to take too long and risk missing my chance to meet the spellcaster, so I wolfed down my soup and bread as fast as I could. Before I knew it, everyone in my vicinity was staring at me in disbelief, including the young boy who worked in the kitchen as the chef's apprentice, as well as the three middle-aged female servants sitting together at the far corner table.

Uh-oh... Maybe it's improper for an attendant to the margravine to eat like such a pig. But they'd already seen me do it, so my only option was to get out of there ASAP.

"My compliments to the chef!" I announced to the apprentice boy as he stood next to the cauldron of soup. Then I turned and bolted out of the room.

Before I made it to the door, however, I heard an angry shout from inside the kitchen.

"HARRIS! What's takin' so damn long?! No daydreamin' on the job!"

Yikes... I hope he doesn't get in too much trouble.

What I didn't realize, however, was that all of Lady Évrard's other attendants were equally eager eaters, and contrary to my fears, this actually convinced everyone watching me that I was *worthy* of the job.

On my way back to meet up with Reggie, I encountered Mabel walking at a rather brisk pace, so I followed her back to the dining hall. There, a waiter stepped out to inform us that His Highness had finished eating, and so we were permitted inside. When we entered, Reggie rose to his feet, and Mabel spoke.

"Unfortunately, His Lordship says it would be too dangerous for you to preside over the inspection. However, once the spellcaster is safely behind bars down in the dungeon, you're more than welcome to observe him then."

"Thank you, Mabel. Will you let me know when the margrave has returned?"

"Certainly, Your Grace." She curtsied deeply. Meanwhile, Reggie shot me a look that said *Is that alright with you?*

I nodded. After all, I could hardly expect to have better luck glimpsing the spellcaster on my own, so I wasn't about to complain. He smiled faintly.

"I'd like to take Kiara with me, if it's no trouble. This spellcaster might have insight into our research."

"Oh?"

Mabel looked surprised to hear this, but nonetheless complied with his request. Thus, it was decided that His Highness would fetch me when the time was right, regardless of whether Lady Évrard had returned by then.

With our meeting at an end, Reggie waved over his knight-guards, and together they headed to the courtyard to do some horseback riding and sword training. *I guess a prince has to be skilled in combat to protect himself.*

As for me, I decided I would check the status of the margravine's room prior to her return, but Mabel's murmur stopped me in my tracks.

"His Highness seems to trust you a great deal."

I could hear a sigh in her voice, so I hastily straightened my posture. *Is this what I think it is? Is she upset that a total stranger has made friends with the prince of Farzia? What if she tells me to stay away from him?! I'll lose my chance to read up on sorcery, and then I won't be able to save his life!* In this worst-case scenario, the only option left would be to risk my job and make the trek back to the Forest of the Thorn Princess!

Technically I could think of one other place where I could learn about magic, but I *really* didn't want to go through with it unless it was absolutely necessary.

Right as the panic started to overload my brain...

"I'm ever so glad to see he's opened up to someone new."

"Huh?!"

I... wasn't expecting her to take this in that direction. Her lips curled in a soft, pained smile.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, dearie. I trust His Highness is a good judge of character. Besides, children can get away with looking past all the formalities. To you, he's just a boy your age... and to him, I'm sure it's a breath of fresh air unlike any friendship he's ever had before."

"Because he's a prince?"

Was he obligated to only form connections with the children of political allies, or something like that?

"That's part of it, but... you see, he's had a difficult childhood. When adoption comes into play, it tends to make things more... complicated."

"It certainly does."

Reggie was not directly descended from the king, but rather the king's older brother. Unfortunately, Reggie's father died just a few years later. And when His Majesty ascended the throne, he had no heirs to his name, so he adopted his brother's young son as his own.

To this day, the king still had no biological children, and so Reggie was his sole heir. One would think this meant the king would cherish him, and yet... I remembered our conversation about unkind family members.

"His family... doesn't really care about him, do they?"

Which meant they probably didn't bother limiting his interactions with other people.

Mabel seemed to intuit that I had an inkling of Reggie's circumstances. "His Highness must have told you an awful lot," she sighed. Not in exasperation, but relief.

It was then I realized that perhaps Mabel had wanted to have this conversation with someone for a long, long time.

"Prince Reginald is the son of His Majesty's elder brother. And if his birth father had lived to take the throne himself, His Highness would have been first in line right after him—ahead of the current king. But then his father passed, and his mother, well... she was so distraught, she left the castle to recuperate, and after that, she was never seen again. And so His Highness was left all alone."

Reggie was only five when he lost his parents.

"Because Prince Reginald was still too young, the previous king named His Majesty as the next heir to the throne. But because the previous king was in such good health, rumors started to spread that he would live long enough to change his mind and choose His Highness later down the line once he was old enough. And His Majesty is known to be a very jealous man. Thus, out of concern for Prince Reginald's well-being, the previous king had His Majesty adopt the boy as his own—but this didn't always stop His Majesty from regarding His Highness as a threat."

Gimme a break, I scoffed to myself. Did he really feel that threatened by a

five-year-old child?

And so Reggie was forced into a life of near isolation. Save for the times when the previous king explicitly invited him to royal events, he was generally left to his own devices by most everyone. After all, as much as they wanted to win favor with the previous king, that favor would only last as long as he remained alive, and they couldn't risk putting themselves in an unfavorable position by upsetting their future king. Thus, they only interacted with the orphan prince when the previous king was around.

My heart ached for Reggie. *What an awful way to grow up.*

"Eventually His Majesty did take a wife, but the marriage was politically motivated—he wanted to avoid a war of attrition with Llewynne. Naturally, the new queen had no interest in making nice with any of us, nor did she see His Highness as anything more than an obstacle to the throne for her own future children. She was no mother to him."

So Reggie spent every day living with a "family" who didn't love him. It must have been sheer agony. I had sensed a common thread between us, but now that I'd heard his story in full, I was starting to think my own childhood wasn't so bad in comparison.

That said, the marriage to Queen Marianne had its upsides. The king had no interest in losing his country to a Llewynian, so he kept Reggie as his heir and avoided having any children with his wife. Then, in order to foster strong connections to the noble houses, he began to send Reggie out as a diplomat. As a result, those who feared the queen naturally took Reggie's side... but the House of Évrard was one of few who sincerely cared for him.

"His aunt, the good Lady Évrard, has fretted over him ever since he was a boy, and he's on good terms with his cousin, Lord Alan. As such, he comes to stay at the Évrard estate fairly often."

Not too often, however, since he had his royal duties to attend to. But at the palace, he never had the opportunity to let loose with friends his own age. Instead, as the crown prince of Farzia, he was obligated to network with a bunch of adults.

"Perhaps he's taken a liking to you precisely because you're so divorced from

all the political baggage... I hope you'll be there for him as much as possible," Mabel finished. And it was clear just how desperately she meant it; I could hear it in her voice.

Reggie wasn't without his share of allies—but only those of a political nature, which meant they were liable to switch sides at the drop of a hat to further their own interests. Not me, though; I was different. That was why Mabel saw value in having me around. And maybe that was the reason why Reggie was willing to take pity on me and help me.

But even so, I still wanted to repay him for it. Over these next two years, I was going to keep looking for a way to save him, right to the very last second. And to that end, I needed more information.

Fortunately, my biggest lead arrived at the castle about an hour later. It was after Lady Évrard had arrived back home from patrols, right around the time she'd finished changing and eating her supper. When Mabel reported the detainee's arrival, she decided to go and see him for herself, and so it was decided that I would accompany her to the front gates.

Just in case, she instructed her other attendants to stand guard a small distance away, then asked Reggie to stay with them. Thus, I alone was free to approach the gates up close with her. As I took my place next to a castle guard, he blinked at me in surprise; evidently he hadn't expected an attendant like myself to *want* to see a dangerous criminal up close.

Meanwhile, Reggie frowned disapprovingly at me, but I ignored him. If I let this opportunity slip through my fingers, I knew I would sorely regret it. I needed to find the key that would lead me to spellcasting!

As I waited, every second felt like an eternity. Then, finally, the gates opened.

The first to enter was Wentworth, along with another knight; they were followed by two soldiers carrying a third man in a faded cloak, his arms slung around their shoulders like he was drunk. Lastly, His Lordship entered along with the rest of the knights.

Evidently this "drunken" man was the defective spellcaster, though frankly, he didn't much look the part. His hair was plain and unstyled, like the sort of person you might see in any farming village, and he wore a ratty brown jacket

over an undyed white shirt and plain pants. To my eyes, he looked like any other towns person... and yet...

The more I looked at him, the more I felt a strange weight in my chest. My heart was racing, and my throat was tight, almost as though I'd suddenly come down with something. Contrary to the common cold, however, my mind remained clear and sharp. I shivered. *Why?* I never felt this way looking at the Thorn Princess, and she was a spellcaster, too! Confused, I struggled to endure my symptoms.

"For a spellcaster, he looks rather ordinary," the margravine commented, and it was then that I realized Lord Évrard had spotted us.

"I didn't realize you were here, my lady. This is no picnic, you know. For the record, he's not a true spellcaster... but regardless, we can't have him roaming around and causing trouble, so I've brought him here."

"Won't that endanger everyone in the castle?"

"Admittedly I've never spoken to a spellcaster before, but my father always told me the defectives are less dangerous. Supposedly they're best kept somewhere quiet."

Meanwhile, my chest pains were growing more and more severe.

Late to the party, Alan turned up. He walked right over to the gates like he planned to observe up close, then spotted me standing there.

"Kiara, you ought to stand back. An ounce of prevention is worth—wait, what's wrong?"

He seemed to realize that I'd lost the ability to speak. Just then, the spellcaster suddenly raised his head and looked directly at... *Me?! Why?!*

"H-Help m—ghrrk!"

He coughed, staining the ground with flecks of scarlet. The soldiers supporting him recoiled slightly in disgust.

"Is he injured?"

"No... I've seen this before. Everyone get back!" the margrave commanded.

As the soldiers moved away, the spellcaster began to plead for his life—to *me*.

“Please... help me... I don’t want to die... Aah... AAAAAHHH!”

As he screamed, his legs gave out and he nearly hit the ground face-first. Fortunately, one of the soldiers ran in to catch him at the last second, lowering him by the arm into a sitting position. Meanwhile, the spellcaster continued to groan and wail. It was agonizing to watch, and yet for some reason, I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

Just then, the soldier whipped his hand away in fear, and the spellcaster’s hand hit the ground with a hard, metallic *THUD*—the sort of sound a human limb shouldn’t have been able to make. Then the spellcaster’s body toppled forward with a loud *CRUNCH*, almost like someone had dropped a boulder. Someone in the crowd let out a shriek.

By this point, my chest had grown so tight, I was tempted to collapse myself. Fortunately, Alan helped me stay upright.

“Seriously, what’s gotten into you? Do you feel sick?” he asked me. I tried to answer, but my voice wouldn’t come.

Before he could lead me away, however... it happened.

A sharp, pyramid-shaped stone shot up, stabbing clear through the spellcaster’s cloak. Then another... and another... and another.

Lady Évrard clapped a hand over her mouth in shock. Reggie stared at the spellcaster, his expression grave. Alan didn’t speak, but I could feel the hand against my back trembling ever so slightly.

Then, without another word, the spellcaster crumbled into dust. With nothing left to support them, his clothes fluttered to the ground, and a strange grayish sand spilled out from the sleeves and collar. In that state, you could scarcely tell that that pile of fabric was where a human being once stood.

At the same time, I felt the weight in my chest slowly lift, and the strength returned to my legs. My mind, however, was still a jumbled mess. What were those symptoms? Why did the spellcaster speak to me? Why did he have to die like that? Did *all* spellcasters turn to sand when they died? Was *I* going to die like that? The thought turned my stomach, and a chill ran down my spine.

Out of nowhere—or perhaps not, given the circumstances—I was starting to have second thoughts about my ambition to learn magic.

Granted, the RPG never depicted whether Game-Kiara turned to sand after she was impaled on that sword. Why? Because the story only included details that directly mattered to the plot or gameplay. But just because something wasn't shown in the RPG, that didn't necessarily mean it wouldn't happen in reality.

After a moment, Lord Évrard ordered his men to clean up the mess, then walked over to Reggie and the others.

"My apologies for letting you witness something so unsightly, Your Grace."

"Unsightly though it was, I feel I've learned something important here today. After all, I'd only ever seen spellcasters in passing up until now."

"They're not all that common, to be sure... and after that, I imagine you can see why."

I sucked in a breath. So they *did* all die like that?

"Of those who push past their human limits in the quest to gain magical power, I'm told the majority pass away in that fashion. Perhaps the power they acquire is ultimately so meager that it dries up almost instantly."

So there were *some* exceptions, then. This came as a small relief. Maybe I could avoid it if I was careful and didn't get too greedy.

"I'm told only a scant few ever gain the power to wield magic at will. It seems no one ever knows for sure whether a given individual will possess the aptitude for it. Out of the ten or twenty disciples a spellcaster may take, only one or two will ever truly succeed. Those who lack the proper aptitude will have to overcome their fear of a grisly death like the one we saw. Even if they succeed in controlling magic, should they ever try to cast a spell outside their means, their lives are forfeit."

Reggie, Alan, and I fell silent.

I hadn't realized the path to sorcery was quite so... *fraught*. I thought you just needed to find a spellcaster to show you the ropes. But apparently I was very,

very wrong.

“That is why my father always taught me to pay the utmost respect to any spellcaster ally you may have, and take the utmost caution against any spellcaster enemy. Anyone who would sacrifice their lifespan to win a battle must never be taken lightly. As for those who fail in their quest, all that awaits them is death, regardless of whether they ever try to cast. If they’re dangerous, your only option is to fell them from a distance or simply wait until they meet their untimely end. For those who pose no danger, I was told that keeping them in a peaceful place would delay the disintegration... Sad to say, but it didn’t work out.”

The margrave sighed heavily. Meanwhile, I fought to endure the terror simmering in my stomach.

Considering Game-Kiara could use magic, it was probably safe to say I had the aptitude, but now I was getting cold feet. Granted, after what she went through, maybe the video game version of me wasn’t afraid to die, but I very much was.

I had a mission: to save Reggie. But once I saved him, everyone would find out that I was a spellcaster, and then they’d probably want me to fight alongside them in the battle to protect Farzia. I was willing to shorten my lifespan if it meant saving a friend, but how long could I keep fighting?

On the other hand, if I refused to join the fight and Reggie later died as a result, I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life.



With all these worries weighing on my mind, I slowly found it harder and harder to stay focused, especially if my body was at rest.

Surrounded by the tranquility of day-to-day life—Lord and Lady Évrard fawning over each other, Alan rolling his eyes, Reggie grinning—it was easy for me to forget about the decisions I would soon need to make. But whenever I tried to read books on sorcery, my eyes would wander from the pages. I didn’t want to remember the defective spellcaster and the way he met his sorry end.

I was deterred from my research by the thought that I, too, might die like

that. Instead, I wanted to forget it all and enjoy the reigning peace we had now. I would think to myself, *Well, I escaped my own tragic fate, didn't I? Maybe Reggie's safe now, too.* And from there, I'd start to wonder if maybe the RPG had nothing to do with my reality at all... but then I'd scold myself, and despair would set in all over again.

"I know better than that," I muttered to myself.

Life wasn't that simple. I only got out of there because I had an inkling of what was to come. But the rest of these people? They were clueless. They lived their lives in ignorance of future events, you know, like normal people. I was the only one with the power to take action, and yet here I was, hesitating. All because I was afraid for my own pathetic life.

Several days had now passed since the death of the spellcaster, and I was once again staring down at a book in the library, though not taking in a single word.

"Kiara, are you feeling okay?" Reggie asked suddenly, and I snapped back to my senses.

"Oh, sorry, Reggie. My mind sort of wandered off. I really shouldn't waste our time like th—"

Just then, I clapped a hand over my mouth. *Oh god, I just called him "Reggie" without thinking!*

"F-Forgive my transgression, Your Highness! I'll endeavor to address you formally from now on!"

Reggie smiled and shook his head. "No need to apologize. Honestly, I'd rather you spoke to me as an equal, the way you used to."

"But sire, you're the crown prince of Farzia!"

"Please, Kiara, you'd be doing me a favor. It'd mean a lot to me, even if you reserve it for when it's just the two of us. We're friends, aren't we?"

I could hardly say no to that, now could I? Reluctantly, I nodded.

"You know, your mind seems to do an *awful* lot of wandering lately. Ever since that spellcaster passed, if I had to guess. Penny for your thoughts?"

I flinched, then cursed myself for wearing my state of mind right on my sleeve. The best thing I could do now would be to think of a plausible excuse.

“I guess... seeing a person turn to dust really had an effect on me.”

Thus, I framed it as though I was simply scarred by the experience in general. Surely it wouldn't be that strange for a girl my age to be fearful of that demonic phenomenon.

“Really? You seemed to be thinking pretty hard about something. Wait...”

Oh god, is he on to me? I braced myself for whatever he was about to say next.

“Did he look like someone you used to know? Is that why his death hit you so hard?”

Fortunately, Reggie's guess didn't quite hit the mark. Internally, I heaved a big sigh of relief. To be fair, he wasn't entirely off-base; one *could* say that spellcaster reminded me of someone. Someone I was going to know in two years unless I changed my fate. In that sense, Reggie was actually kind of right.

“Maybe so,” I replied vaguely, staring at the floor. I was afraid that if he saw my face, he'd know I was hiding something.

But then I felt his fingers against my chin—*Wait, what?! He's touching me?!—*and the next thing I knew, he was standing right next to me, one hand flat on the desk, the other cupped along my jawline, tilting my face up to meet his.

His blue eyes flickered in the candlelight, boring into mine. His touch tickled me, and I could feel my face flush. But somehow, this reaction seemed to satisfy his suspicions.

“Well, your complexion's looking a bit better now, at least.” And with that, he pulled his hand away.

Every now and then Reggie could be such a shameless flirt, and it never failed to fluster me. Then he made an interesting proposal.

“Seeing as you can't quite focus on the search, why don't we step outside for fresh air and a change of pace? I wager you haven't seen much of the land, since you don't accompany the margravine on her patrols.”

He was right, of course. Right from the first day I arrived here, I had dedicated every moment of my free time to my research. Thus, I never left the castle unless I was tasked with an errand—not even to visit the garden. Admittedly, it didn't strike me as a particularly healthy lifestyle, so I agreed to Reggie's suggestion.

Leading me by the hand, he guided me out of the library.

"Where are you going, Your Highness?" asked a knight stationed just outside the door—a man with dark reddish-brown hair and sharp, unfriendly eyes. Perhaps this man was one of the knight-guards Reggie had brought with him from the palace; his uniform was navy blue in color.

"I want to explore the castle grounds for a bit."

At this, a nearby attendant dashed off.

Together, we walked through the castle until we arrived at the stables. There, we found that the attendant from earlier had arrived ahead of us to instruct the stablehand to prepare two horses: a brown one for Reggie and another one for the knight-guard.

"Do you know how to ride a horse, Kiara?"

I shook my head. I'd always wanted to try, but the count never let me anywhere near his horses. Looking back, he probably did that on purpose to prevent me from escaping.

To my amateur eyes, Reggie looked like a master rider, the way he expertly slid his feet into the stirrups. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me up onto the horse with him. His grip was stronger than I anticipated, and in the end, I settled into a sidesaddle sitting position.

"Whoa... We're really high up!"

I was now sitting at a height greater than my own, and my heart raced with a mix of excitement and trepidation. Then Reggie slid an arm around my waist to grab the reins.

"Don't lean over too far, Kiara. If you fall off, it's on you." He snickered as I hastily straightened my posture.

Then the horse began to move forward, and despite its slow pace, it jostled me around quite a bit. Fearful, I grabbed the front of the saddle with both hands, but this didn't help me much. It felt like I was going to slide right off any minute now. Just as I found myself wishing I could sit astride the horse like Reggie, however, I felt his arm tighten around my waist, and relief flooded me.

"Sorry about that! Don't worry, I've got you. Just try to relax." He smiled at me, and I nodded reluctantly.

A short while later, the three of us (me, Reggie, and his knight-guard) left the castle grounds. There was no moat or drawbridge between us and the sprawling meadow that wrapped around the hill, and so we headed right down the slope.

By that point, I had finally gotten the hang of riding sidesaddle. Now that I knew how to brace myself against all the jostling, I could finally focus on the scenery around me. Eventually, the path led into a leafy copse.

"Interesting... The trees grow rather sparsely here. I seem to recall the foliage was rather more abundant when I arrived, but perhaps not," I remarked to myself.

"You can't really see the land for yourself when you're all cooped up in a carriage or a castle."

"Yes, it seems I couldn't quite see the full picture. Oh, this is quite the small thicket, isn't it? We're almost through it!"

On the other side of the trees, I could see more small hills, plains, and farm fields with rows of... cabbages, perhaps? What about the plot next to it—what were those little green sprouts?

Just then, I heard Reggie gasp and snapped back to attention. Before I could ask what was wrong, however, he immediately turned our horse around and goaded it into a run.

"Hold on tight!"

Terrified of being thrown off the horse, I clung to Reggie as if my life depended on it—and considering people died in horse accidents all the time, it probably did. Hence, I felt absolutely no shame in doing so.

“What’s going on?!”

“Your pursuer is here.”

“What?!” *What do you mean, my pursuer?!* But I was too scared of falling off to risk looking back.

Then the horse slowed its pace, and we reentered the grove from earlier.

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

“Because I saw Patriciél’s servant back there. And yes, I’m absolutely certain it was the same man.”

My eyes widened. *Why? Why now, and not sooner?*

“Do you think he’s been watching the castle all this time?!”

And for that matter, why would they bother going so far out of their way to get me back? Especially since I wasn’t yet a spellcaster!

“I’m afraid I can’t say for sure.” He glanced behind us, then turned to the knight. “The man who stepped out of the cottage just then—is he pursuing us?”

“No... I didn’t see a horse nearby, and I imagine he would’ve found it difficult to follow on foot,” the knight replied.

“Then perhaps we’re safe.” Reggie heaved a sigh of relief. “It’s possible someone has recently informed them of your presence here. That would explain the near month-long delay.” Evidently, I wasn’t the only one who found the time gap peculiar. His expression hardened. “I don’t think he saw you, but we should return to the castle just to be safe. Clearly I was a little too eager to take you outside... Next time I’ll have my attendants search the area in advance.”

“Oh, I couldn’t trouble you to do that! I don’t mind hiding in the castle.”

“Perhaps for now, but you know you can’t stay in there forever.”

As we spoke, our horses trotted along. Just then, I saw a group of men on horseback headed our way from the castle; I guessed that they were the rest of Reggie’s knight-guards. After all, they’d want to ensure the safety of their prince, right?

But when they approached us, they drew their swords.

“Enemies?!”

“Groul, wait!” But before Reggie could stop him, the knight had already ridden out in front of us. “Kiara, hold tight!”

He pushed me forward until I was lying flat against the horse’s back. Clinging to its neck, I looked up at the men before us.

For some reason, my brain was quick to try and interpret this predicament as an in-game battle. Only one attack was permitted per unit; even if he took down one of our opponents on his turn, Groul would still need to dodge or deflect three more attacks... and I wasn’t sure how much HP he had.

Then one of the horsemen came at Reggie. I shrieked as the man swung his sword down, and the next thing I heard was the clang of metal as Reggie intercepted it with his own. The vibration made me flinch.

Meanwhile, I held on for dear life as the horse reversed course, and the next thing I knew, the attacker had toppled to the ground. I didn’t know how Reggie had managed it, but before I could get too impressed, our horse started to charge at the fallen man. That was when my fear *really* set in.

I was already afraid of being attacked and killed, but at the same time, I was no less afraid of hurting people, even if the circumstances called for it. But I didn’t have the means to escape on my own, so all I could do was try to stay out of Reggie’s way... and the thought that I was a burden to him was killing me inside.

Our horse came to a stop near a second enemy, and Reggie swung his sword again... but then a third one rode up, and we were officially outnumbered. The third horseman untied his sword, backed his horse away, and called out:

“Give us the girl!”

Sure enough, they were after me. But Reggie didn’t even bat an eyelash.

“I refuse.”

The two enemies raised their swords. Reggie was going to die, and it was going to be my fault.

“Reggie, no! You can’t die here! Not for a nobody like me!”

He was the sole heir to the throne of Farzia. Without him, the nation would fall into chaos.

Not only that, but this battle was only taking place because I’d run away from school. It never happened in the RPG, and so I couldn’t guarantee Reggie would make it out alive.

“Please don’t call yourself a nobody, Kiara.” Keeping his eyes on the enemy, he held me tightly around the waist. “You’re my friend, and I don’t want you to die, so instead I’m going to help you. That’s just the way it works.”

His words struck a chord in me—so deeply, I could scarcely breathe. Meanwhile, the enemy charged at us, and a metallic clang thundered just overhead as I clung blindly to the horse. Then I heard Reggie groan, and my heart ached as if it were clenched in a vise.

But right as I turned to look up at him, Groul rode over to provide backup. Once he had positioned himself between Reggie and the enemy, Reggie steered our horse away. We now had a clear shot to the castle.

Surely Groul wouldn’t have come to our aid in the first place unless he had defeated the enemy he was fighting... or had he just shaken his adversary off for a moment? Was he going to have to fight two men at once? Would he survive?

Just as this fresh terror began to sink in, more help arrived.

“Your Grace!”

Down came three knights on horseback, whom I recognized from around the castle.

“Groul’s back there!” Reggie yelled.

Evidently, this told them all they needed to know. One knight remained with us while the other two galloped off to assist Groul. Perhaps he would make it out of this alive after all... and Reggie would make it safely back to the castle!

I was so relieved, I nearly let go of the horse. Fortunately, I caught myself, as it was much too early to celebrate. By the time we arrived back at the castle,

however, I had grown so stiff that I could no longer move my arms—a fact Reggie noticed right away.

“Oh, I’ll help you.”

Gently, he pried my shaking hands away from the horse. Then he scooped me up and carried me to the ground. While I felt guilty for being such a burden to him, truth be told, his touch was exactly what I needed to calm down. That was my first experience with sword combat, and it had been a little traumatic.

“Shall I carry her for you, Your Highness?” the accompanying knight asked.

“No need. Instead, I’d like you to summon the margrave. Oh, and we’ll need to search the premises. Could you gather everyone together?”

With that, Reggie carried me to a raised flower bed and sat me down on the stone siding. Here, we were concealed from sight by the shrubbery that served as partitions between each flower bed. Now that we were away from the horses and the commotion, I could feel my trembling start to recede.

“Feel better?”

“I do. Thank you, Reggie. Listen... you can’t do things like that,” I told him in a quavery voice. “You can’t risk your life to protect me. In times like those, you need to leave me and escape. The life of a prince matters far more than the life of a nobody like me!”

“I’m not going to do that, Kiara,” Reggie argued. “Like I said, you’re my friend. It’s only natural for me to stand up for you.”

“But why put yourself in danger?!”

“Because no one in this world understands me like you do.”

It was then that I understood. My mind drifted back to the moment I first sensed a connection between us.

“Most people aren’t quite so willing to accept another person’s ugliest, most negative emotions,” he continued. “They’d rather not make waves, so instead they stay quiet and look the other way. But you? You saw the ugliness in my heart and acknowledged it outright. And that was the moment I finally felt like I could breathe again.”

I nodded. I knew what it was like to think to myself, *At last, I don't have to keep it bottled up inside.* I fully understood that joy.

"Is it so wrong of me to not want to lose you?" he asked, and I found I couldn't argue.

"But... I don't know if I have the strength to risk my life for *you*," I muttered mournfully. After all, surely that was the only way I could repay someone who was willing to go that far for me. And yet the thought frightened me.

"Risk your life? What do you mean by that? Is that why you've been thinking so much lately? Is something going to put us in danger again?"

He peered into my eyes, and although his expression was soft, his gaze suggested he wouldn't accept anything but the truth. If I tried to talk my way out of it, I got the feeling he would keep asking questions until I backed myself into a corner.

Then it occurred to me: maybe it was safer in the long run to risk him thinking I was crazy. I just couldn't bear to keep agonizing over it alone.

"Reggie, you may think me a Jeremian zealot for what I'm about to say, but I want you to hear me out. This is going to sound absurd, but... I've seen another world in my dreams."

"Another world? How do you mean?"

"Two years from now, you'll be chosen to represent Farzia in a conference with Salekhard. This castle will serve as your meeting place. And when you arrive... Llewyne will attack."

"Llewyne's going to attack us two years from now?"

Unsurprisingly, Reggie looked puzzled... but I couldn't back down now. Steeling my resolve, I pushed on.

"Yes. And when they do, you'll be killed. I don't know what it will take to avoid that fate, but I want you to be wary of Llewyne, and of the queen. In a year's time, I'm sure I'll have... err... found the strength to make a stand. To protect you. But I'm scared that I won't be able to, so I—"

"Hold on a minute, Kiara. Slow down. You saw this in a dream? A dream in

which I die two years from now?”

I nodded, and my stomach tightened until I could scarcely breathe. There was no doubt in my mind that Reggie now saw me as the sort of religious extremist who saw her dreams as messages from God.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to find out for sure, because that was the moment Lord Évrard turned up with Wentworth and the others in tow.

Reggie explained everything on my behalf, and when he was finished, the margrave immediately set about making preparations to search for the servant of Patriciél. As the knights and servants all went their separate ways, Sir Groul walked up. Together, he and Reggie returned inside the castle with the margrave to discuss matters further.

Personally, I was relieved that our conversation had been cut short. Once the feeling returned to my legs, I tracked down Lady Évrard, who had already heard all about the attack.

“Don't you worry. Stick with me, and I'll keep you safe!” she assured me, proudly clapping a hand to her chest. Somehow, this woman managed to be strong *and* beautiful at the same time.

“You're in good hands with my mother,” Alan agreed, standing in the doorway to the margravine's room. “Just don't leave the castle and you should be fine.”

Hold on a minute... You make her sound like she's a knight or something! Wasn't she originally a princess of Farzia? Why did she turn out like this?

“If only I were as strong as you, Your Ladyship. What age were you when you first started studying the sword?” I asked, hoping to talk about something else for a change. It was a question I'd been secretly dying to ask for a while now.

“She only got into it because my father—”

“*Alan!* Not another word!” his mother shouted, cutting him off. Then she rose from the sofa, dashed to the door, and seized him by the collar. “I told you not to tell anyone!” she growled.

“But the whole castle already knows!”

“What?! How?!”

“The better question is, why do *you* want to hide it?!”

This mother-son exchange put a smile on my face. It was clear the Évrard family all cared for one another very much, and the thought warmed my heart. I could still remember what it felt like to have a loving family, even if I wasn't blessed with one in my current life.

Once she had finished giving her son a hard time, Her Ladyship turned back to me, her expression serious.

“I must say, those ruffians had quite a lot of nerve to attack you unprovoked. Even if you did run away from home, there's still a proper procedure to be upheld! Of all the disrespect, I say!”

“Aren't you going to have a strong word with them, milady?” Alan asked.

But the margravine shook her head. “Even if I did, I wouldn't get much in the way of an apology. If anything, it would just give them even more of an advantage. The Kiara we have here at the castle is *not* the adopted daughter of the count; she's a distant relative I've employed as my attendant. Even if they injured her, the most we could petition for would be to punish the soldiers responsible. Otherwise, we'd be admitting that she *is*, in fact, the very girl they're searching for, and then they'll take her away from us. Lest you forget, we're dealing with a man who was so desperate to enact this political marriage, he was willing to drug and kidnap his own 'daughter' against her will. Who knows what else he might do.”

She was completely right, of course. Lord Patriciél had almost never treated me as his own child, save for the times in which he would look good doing so. Outside of those few moments, however, I was essentially a glorified servant who was given the privilege of nice clothes and extravagant meals. For him, this was no different than if his pet dog had escaped from the backyard... and if he captured me, I would inevitably be punished.

Naturally, I was eternally grateful to the House of Évrard for taking me in. But at the same time, if I truly wanted to save Reggie, perhaps my best option would be to let them take me back... My heart throbbed painfully at the thought.

“In that case, wouldn’t they realize their actions would only put us on guard?” Alan asked.

Lady Évrard tilted her head pensively. “Hmm... You bring up a good point.”

Unbeknownst to us, the answer was soon to come.



Later that night, right as I was getting ready for bed, Wentworth turned up at my door to inform me that His Lordship was asking for me. From there, the two of us headed off to meet with him.

I had no idea what the margrave would want of me, but I figured he likely had some questions about the assailants from earlier. Thus, I left my room wearing little more than a shawl over my nightgown. As we walked, however, it soon became apparent that our destination was outside the castle proper. Though winter had long passed, the nights were still chilly, and I flinched at the cold. *Why on earth is he taking me outside?*

Fortunately, Wentworth seemed to intuit my confusion.

“We’ve apprehended the man who came searching for you on our way here,” he explained quietly.

“What?! Really?!”

I was so relieved to hear they’d arrested him that I didn’t pause to consider why I was being summoned. Instead, I followed Wentworth in blissful ignorance.

We entered the tower and headed down the staircase to an underground passageway. The longer we walked, the more I started to wonder where we were headed. “Where are we?” I asked.

“This is the dungeon, where prisoners are kept. His Highness and His Lordship are both down here.”

This came as a bit of a relief. No matter what happened, I trusted Reggie to have my back. Still... Why were we meeting in the dungeon, of all places? Was this a precautionary measure to ensure our conversation wouldn’t be overheard? Or did His Lordship want me to get a look at the detainee for some

reason? Puzzled, I kept walking.

Just then, I became strangely conscious of my pounding heart. Was I afraid of entering the dungeon at night, with only torches and Wentworth's candlestick to light my path?

But my heart continued to race long after we arrived at our destination.

"I apologize for summoning you here at this hour, Miss Kiara," said the margrave. He was still wearing his cloak and breastplate as though he had only just arrived back home, and his sword hung at his hip.

"Thanks for coming," Reggie added. He, too, was wearing his cloak.

"Did you need me for something?" I asked.

"Here in this cell is one of the men you saw earlier today," His Lordship explained. "He's been acting rather strange, you see... I wanted to wait until he calmed down a bit before I sent for you."

He gestured to a nearby cell, but before I could peer inside, Reggie stopped me.

"I know you've seen this once before, but be warned: he's in a rather gruesome state. We suspect he's a defective spellcaster."

I could imagine what this meant. Steeling myself, I slowly turned and looked into the cell... and the moment I laid eyes upon him, my heart lurched so hard, it nearly rattled my stomach along with it. But in my head, I couldn't rationalize this reaction; after all, he wasn't in nearly as bad a shape as the other spellcaster.

His back was protruding upwards, but there was no sign of any spear-shaped stones. If anything, he was just a bit swollen, almost as though he'd come down with the mumps or something.

"If only he hadn't made me drink that potion," he mumbled, staring into space. "It all started after I drank it... All at once, my whole body was in agony... I knew it was peculiar straight away... Scarlet, like the blood in my veins... Yes, I just knew it had to be poison. He poisoned me to keep me quiet, I'm sure of it..."

One look, and I knew at once that his spirit was broken beyond repair. Given who he worked for, I felt no sympathy for him, but it still pained me to see it.

“Does any part of what he’s saying sound familiar to you?” His Lordship asked.

“Has Lord Patriciél ever talked to you about a scarlet poison?” Reggie chimed in.

I tilted my head in contemplation for a moment... and then it hit me.

On the first day I arrived at the House of Patriciél, the count had poured me a drink; it was dark red in color, but at the time, I had simply assumed it was some sort of fruit juice. He explained that this drink was reserved “for special occasions.” After I drank it, I slept for three days straight. When I finally awoke, however, Lord Patriciél was uncharacteristically kind to me, or so I recalled.

But now here was a man who had drunk the very same thing, and as a result, he was now a defective spellcaster. Could this beverage be some kind of special potion that transformed its consumer into a caster? Is that why the count had been so nice to me when I awoke—because I hadn’t turned to dust in my sleep? That would certainly explain why he was so dogged in his pursuit of me.

If that was the case, then... did that mean I already *was* a defective spellcaster? Even though I’d never cast a single spell in my life? Still, it was the only thing that made sense.

I bit my lip. If I told them that I knew of the red potion—that I, too, had once imbibed it—would they think me a spellcaster? Would they toss me right into the cell with this one as a “preventative measure”? The thought drained away any desire I had to be forthright.

Instead, I denied it.

“Um, I’m not sure. I’ve... never seen anything of the sort.”

Lord Évrard didn’t doubt me for a single moment.

“Ah, I see. I was thinking perhaps you might know if any particular poison is involved in the spellcaster transformation process. You see, we’ve realized how these men were able to infiltrate our lands right under our noses.”

Because the province of Évrard was situated on the border, where international conflicts were most likely to break out, His Lordship used a network of spies to stay up-to-date on any suspicious individuals or vehicles entering his domain, their country of origin, and their numbers. That way, he could determine whether to anticipate a diplomatic negotiation or a fight.

“We’ve discovered that several of our informants have been murdered. I’ve requested more men and increased surveillance, but in the meantime, we know that the soldiers of Patriciél have killed at least two. We’ve also found two other bodies—people who somehow burned to death, even though nothing in the area showed any signs of fire damage. Ergo, we’ve deduced the following: that Lord Patriciél has concocted a way to reliably produce spellcasters, and that he is sending said spellcasters into our domain.”

Now I understood why His Lordship had turned to me for potential insight. I could remember the potion’s bittersweet taste and gravelly consistency, almost like it was made of wet sand. In reality, it was probably just added sugar that hadn’t dissolved all the way, but the unpleasant texture had left a distinct impression on me.

Of course, I couldn’t say for sure whether the drink was actually poison or not. All I could do was shrug my shoulders.

“Hmm...”

Reggie spoke up at last. “I think it’s safe to say they’ve devised *some* sort of formula to create spellcasters. Or defective ones, at the very least. There’s simply an abnormal amount of them wandering around lately.”

Internally, I agreed with his assessment. This was probably the reason why Game-Kiara became a spellcaster in the first place; clearly the count knew something no one else did.

In addition, I’d realized something else about the upcoming siege at Évrard Castle: if they were painstakingly assassinating all of our sentries and spies, then it was entirely feasible the enemy forces could march all the way to the edge of the border without anyone noticing.

“You may return to your quarters,” the margrave told me. “Again, my apologies for disturbing you in the middle of the night. If I have any other

questions, I'll be in touch with you again. That goes for you, too, Prince Reginald. Get some well-deserved rest."

And so, at His Lordship's prompting, the two of us climbed the stairs out of the dungeon and left the tower. There, we found Reggie's knight-guard Groul waiting for us. Personally, I was relieved to see he was unharmed.

"I'm glad you're safe," I told him.

He blinked at me in mild surprise, then nodded slightly. "Thank you."

I had wanted to finish our conversation from this afternoon and warn Reggie of things to come in two years' time, but after what I'd learned in the dungeon, it was possible he would start to view me as suspicious. Instead, I decided I'd wait until the dust had settled, so to speak, and only give him the bare essentials. Thus, it was time I returned to my room.

"Well, I'll be going now..." I began, but Reggie piped up almost immediately.

"Say, Groul, I'd like to walk Kiara back to her room."

"As you wish, Your Grace."

And so it was decided that Reggie would accompany me along the way. For the first time since we met, being around him now made me feel deeply uncomfortable... but why? I could try to laugh it off with some manner of lighthearted conversation, but it was hard to joke around with Groul right there.

In the end, we walked to my quarters in silence. This was actually something of a relief. Standing at my bedroom door, I turned to him and once again attempted to say good night.

"Sleep well, Reggie, and—"

"I need to speak with you. Sorry, Groul, could you wait out here?"

And with a smile, he walked past me into my room.

Reggie! You can't just walk in without my permission!

Not that I really minded all that much, since Her Ladyship had ordered me to get some bed rest after the ambush, and so I'd had plenty of time to tidy up in there... but still, entering a young lady's room at this hour? Think of the optics!

“Reggie, wait!”

I dashed into the room after him and found him standing near the door, wearing his usual grin. For a moment, I wasn’t sure what to say to him.

“Don’t you think... um... it’s getting a bit late? You must be tired. What about tomorrow? Yes, let’s talk first thing tomorrow.”

But Reggie flat-out ignored my suggestion and instead closed the door behind us with one hand.

“Huh?”

Uh, Reggie? Buddy? We may not be legal adults, but we’re still teenagers. Don’t you think maybe we SHOULDN’T lock ourselves up alone together in a room with no other exits? What are you doing?!

I stared at him, perplexed. Then he looked at me. Instinctively, I took a step backward... and promptly bumped up against the closed door. Then—if you can believe it—he seized me by the shoulders and pressed me harder against it.



“Wh... Wh... Wha... Wha...?”

I kept trying to ask “What are you doing?” or “What’s gotten into you?” but my mouth wasn’t working properly. Meanwhile, Reggie continued to grin in amusement, his face faintly illuminated by the single candlestick burning on the table nearby.

Stop that! You’re freaking me out... in more ways than one!

“No, I think we need to have this conversation *tonight*. And I know all I have to do is get you flustered to make you start talking.”

“Urk!”

Hold on a minute. You’re telling me he was angling for this on purpose?!

“I get the feeling it’s something Groul’s better off not hearing, hence I asked him to stay outside. But surely you know better than to hide something from me, right? We’re friends, aren’t we?”

That’s the reason he wanted to come inside?! To get rid of Groul and make it easier for me to spill the beans?! Just how devious is this guy?!

“You’re... You’re twisted, Reggie!” I exclaimed in spite of myself. But he didn’t even bat an eyelash.

“Kiara.” The smile faded from his face as his fingers tightened around my shoulders. “Where did you learn the information you told me earlier today?”

“Um... In a dream?” I said, though I was pretty sure I’d already told him that when we spoke earlier.

“For a mere dream, you seem a bit too certain of its accuracy.”

“Well, back at the boarding school, I was a devout student of the Scriptures of Jeremiah.”

“And yet you seemingly never make time for morning prayer, nor do you say grace at mealtimes.”

“Ngh...!”

He had seen right through me, and it was entirely my fault. Indeed, I hadn’t been conducting myself very piously at all. Unfortunately, my views on the

religion of this world had been tempered by my memories of my past life. After all, if such a god truly did exist, surely they would've rescued me from my miserable childhood and spared me from a man like Lord Patriciél.

Now, if this god was a computer program, *that* I could understand. It made sense that I was an anomaly, seeing as I still possessed memories I wasn't supposed to have. Maybe "the Goddess playing her flute" was really just a glitch in the code or something.

But Reggie wasn't about to let me off the hook.

"You'd rather lie to me? Can't you trust me?"

A hint of sadness colored his expression, and my chest ached like my heart was being wrung out to dry. I didn't want to hurt him.

"It's not that," I replied reflexively.

"Are you scared that something bad will happen if you tell me?" he asked.

No... I couldn't let him find out that I was possibly a defective spellcaster. Otherwise they'd all start to suspect me... and that, more than anything, was what I truly feared.

"Are you afraid of me? Or are you afraid of confessing?" he pressed. After a moment of silence, he sighed. "If you're used to these sorts of verbal threats, then perhaps what you require is a little *encouragement*."

"What?!"

What's THAT supposed to mean?! He's not going to choke me, is he?! Or cut me with his sword?!

Terrifying thoughts flashed through my mind one after another. Just then, I felt something brush my cheek... something far softer than a blade. My eyes widened.

Was that... his LIPS?!

Instantly, the strength drained from my legs, and Reggie grinned as if he'd planned it.

"Let me rephrase the question," he whispered. "You've been doing research

to try to figure out how to make yourself into a spellcaster, haven't you?"

"Wha... How did you—"

I gasped and clapped a hand over my mouth a moment too late. After what I just said, I'd practically given it all away! *And another thing: why are you trying to put the moves on me, Reggie?! I'm a little concerned that you know how to do that at age fifteen!*

He peered into my eyes and smiled.

"You claimed you wanted to learn more about the Thorn Princess's necklace, and yet you never seemed all that afraid of it. On the contrary, you were passionately focused on spellcasters of all sorts, weren't you?"

Apparently he'd noticed some inconsistencies in my behavior; my reaction to the defective spellcaster's death had clued him in. *Good grief, how is he so sharp?! And if he's this smart, how on earth does he get himself killed in two years?!*

On second thought, perhaps his intelligence was precisely why the queen would have him assassinated.

"Although only a scant few people have a spellcaster's constitution, and no one can predict whether they'll have it... and yet for some mysterious reason, you seemed committed to the cause. So it occurred to me that perhaps the reason you suggested you could protect me in two years' time is because you've decided you'll turn yourself into a spellcaster before the deadline."

Oh no, I DID suggest that, didn't I?! I wish I could go back in time and punch myself! Ugh, how on earth can I talk my way out of this when I'm a total blockhead and he's a mind-reader?!

It was time to throw in the towel.

"The truth is, I think I know what red potion that man was talking about... because... Lord Patriciél made me drink something just like it."

At this, Reggie sighed and shook his head like he'd seen it coming. "Well, you don't seem to be on death's door, at any rate. If anything, you seem fit as a fiddle. And considering your surprise when you first heard about it, I'd wager

you had no idea it had any connection to spellcasters at all.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Yeah? Good. I’m glad to hear it.” His lips curled in a relieved smile.

Wait, what? I blinked in confusion. “Aren’t you going to lock me up with that other spellcaster to make sure I don’t go crazy and start flinging spells around?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous, Kiara. Of course not.” He stared at me like I’d grown a second head. “You’re not a danger to anyone. You can’t use magic. So why on earth would we lock you up?”

“Well, um, what if that changes in the near future?”

“Hmmm...” He paused to think. “Well, you don’t appear to have any spellcaster buddies, and the margrave’s library certainly doesn’t seem to have any useful resources for you, so I imagine you’ll have a hard time learning more about magic on your own. I’ll look into it when I return to the palace.”

“What? You mean it?!”

He nodded firmly, and I heaved a sigh of relief. The royal palace was bound to have a font of resources on the subject; plus, I had heard they hired spellcasters onsite as well. Any information found there was bound to be accurate.

“How long has it been since you drank that potion, anyway? The man in the dungeon seemed perfectly fine when we first met him near the Forest of the Thorn Princess, so he must not have drunk it until afterward. Not sure if it was the count himself or someone else who gave it to him, but regardless, that would mean it’s only been two weeks at most.”

“Hmmm... He had me drink it pretty soon after he first adopted me, so that would’ve been years ago by now. The first time I had it, I slept for about three days straight, but every time after that, it would just make me sick to my stomach for a while. I just assumed it was some sort of poison, or perhaps a bizarre health drink passed down in the Patriciél family.”

“*Health drink?* You have the strangest notions, I swear,” Reggie laughed. “I’d say ‘poison’ isn’t altogether incorrect, since it’s killing people in much the same way. But you, on the other hand, drank it with no problem... so perhaps you

really do have the constitution for it.”

I nodded. If I didn’t, I clearly would have died by now... just like in the RPG. The real question was: why couldn’t I cast even a tiny bit of magic?

“More importantly, I’d like to know why you suddenly wanted to tell me about what will happen two years from now. Did you hear it from the count or something? Or read it in his diary?”

I could tell from the expression on his face that this question was of the utmost importance to him, and I couldn’t blame him for wanting to get to the root of the conspiracy right away... but unfortunately, I hadn’t gleaned this information from anyone here in our world.

“I really did see it in a dream. A waking dream, or something like that.”

“A dream, hmm...”

He frowned, and I could tell he was about to call me crazy, so I decided to give him the full rundown—plus or minus some minor adjustments.

“It’s hard to explain, but ever since I was a girl, I’ve had these dreams in which I get married to a man by the name of Credias. Then, after the ceremony, they turn me into a spellcaster against my will and send me to serve as an attendant to the queen. In two years’ time, Llewyrne invades the country, and I’m forced to fight Alan and his comrades—only to be slain by his hand. Of course, for the longest time, I assumed it was just a dream, but then I saw the letter from Lord Patriciél, and I... I ran. I was terrified of that dream coming true.”

Granted, I still didn’t want to fight Alan, but now it was for a different reason. After all, he had been kind enough to let me ride in his carriage *and* hire me at his family’s estate! Plus, his parents had accepted me, too... and Reggie had supported me every step of the way as my dearest friend. I couldn’t possibly fight any one of them!

But I knew telling him all this would only confuse him, so I decided to cut the conversation short.

“I know it’s completely groundless and absurd. Call me crazy if you must, but I’m begging you, please, promise me you’ll be careful. If things really do turn out like they did in my dream, I swear I’ll protect you like you protected me,

so... please don't push me away."

I didn't expect him to believe me completely. All I needed him to understand was that he was in danger, and that I wanted to keep him safe.

He paused to think for a moment.

"I agree it's a bit too far-fetched for me to believe so readily. Perhaps a Jeremian priest, but not me. You should know, however, that I already suspected the count of plotting something nefarious, especially after this most recent stunt he's pulled. So I'm thinking we should inform the others of your concerns. No one here wants to see the castle fall into their hands."

"But they won't believe me..."

"Perhaps not. That's why I'll warn them... about the queen and about Lord Patriciél."

Suddenly, it felt as though a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. The margrave might not believe me, but surely he would believe the prince of Farzia! But right as I was starting to catch my breath, Reggie drew his lips to my ear once more.

"That way you won't need to protect me."

"Huh?"

My eyes widened. Then I remembered the feeling of his lips against my cheek, and my whole body tensed up.

"But... if a war breaks out, you'll be better off with a caster on your side!"

Having an ally spellcaster would easily turn the tides of battle in our favor. Even if Reggie survived the siege at Évrard Castle, it wouldn't entirely prevent the rest of the battles from taking place. Alan and the others would most likely still have to fight.

"Can you guarantee that you'll survive the transition to a spellcaster? Besides, I thought that was the *last* thing you wanted for yourself! Isn't that why you ran from the wedding ceremony in the first place? And even more so, now that you've seen how they die!"

He wasn't exactly wrong, of course. I fell silent.

At last, Reggie took a step back. Then he let go of my shoulders and instead clasped my hand in his. “Not only that, but there are only two ways I can think of in which you could make yourself a caster. Either you seek the aid of the Thorn Princess, or... you return to Lord Patriciél.”

I flinched. How did he always put two and two together so quickly?

Obviously the Thorn Princess was the preferable of the two, but if I wanted to ensure I would succeed in my endeavors, then the House of Patriciél was my only option. Of course, I’d probably get forced into that marriage with the viscount all over again—hence, it was my absolute last resort. Still, it was looking more and more likely with each passing day.

Then Reggie grinned as though he’d read my mind. “I’m not going to let you do that, Kiara. I would rather die in front of you than let you go back there.”

“What?!”

How can you say that?! I stared at him in shock as he lifted my hand and bowed his forehead against my fingers.

“I want you to make me a promise, Kiara. Promise me you won’t turn yourself into a spellcaster behind my back.”

“Behind your back? Are you saying you forbid it?”

I blinked at him in surprise, and he nodded. Evidently I had heard him correctly.

“I won’t let you walk that treacherous path alone. If the situation calls for it, then I’ll go in your place, understood? Now, promise me you won’t put yourself in danger while I’m away, Kiara. You’re a very dear friend to me, and I don’t want to lose you.”

His words echoed in my head over and over. My sight blurred, and something warm dripped down my cheeks... *Tears*. How long had it been since I last felt this sting in my nose?

Before I knew it, I was sobbing uncontrollably into my hands. Oh, how desperately I’d yearned for someone to say those words to me. To tell me I didn’t need to put myself in harm’s way. To protect me.

As someone who never really got to experience what it was like to have loving parents, there was no one in my life I could trust unconditionally. Deep down, I'd wanted so badly to have this conversation with him, but he was the closest thing I had to a friend, and I was terrified the absurdity of it all would drive him away.

And yet, Reggie had accepted me regardless. In my relief, the dam had burst, and now the tears wouldn't stop... but Reggie wasn't finished.

"If you break your promise, there *will* be consequences. Understand?"

"I understand."

Even if I was forced to go against my word and provoke his anger, at least he wouldn't leave me. And I desperately didn't want to lose him.



Right as Alan reached the top of the stairs, he spotted a dear friend and called out to him.

"Re—"

Fortunately, he stopped himself just in time. Reggie wasn't alone... and tonight, in addition to his usual knight-guard, Kiara was with him as well.

"Wh—"

He clapped a hand over his mouth, stopping himself once more. Reggie and Kiara had just walked into her room... *and shut the door.*

Hold on a minute, Reggie! You're not hooking up with her, are you?! With Kiara, of all people?!

He knew the boy was rather sympathetic to her plight, but was *that* his true motivation?

No, no, that can't be right. Reggie knows better than that!

If he were a normal prince, he could sleep around as much as he liked, and no one would bat an eyelash... but for someone in his position, it wasn't that simple. If the girl in question had ties to Llewyrne, he might unwittingly put himself in danger. But of course, Alan knew he didn't have to worry about that.

The Reggie I know would never make a move on HER of all people, surely!

Not that Kiara was ugly by any means; no, she was quite pretty in her own way. But personality-wise, she was far too frivolous to be worthy of a prince. Considering she hailed from a noble family, one would expect her to conduct herself with dignity and grace, and yet here she was, swan diving off of her bed, flinging zapgrasses around, and generally acting like an oaf. No one who witnessed her behavior would believe she was once the daughter of a count.

Worse still, she had given up her title—admittedly of her own volition, but Reggie hadn't opposed it. One would think he would have, if he was at all interested in a serious partnership with her.

They're a little overly familiar with each other, if you ask me.

Whenever Reggie came to visit the Évrard estate, he and Alan would usually end up completely inseparable... but this time around, Reggie was spending a considerable amount of time with Kiara instead. They'd sit in the library together all morning long, and sometimes (like tonight) they'd stay that way to dinnertime and beyond. As a result, Alan was frequently bored to tears, as there was no one around to spar with.

It's not that I'm jealous, of course. That's not why I'm criticizing Kiara. I'm just worried about them, that's all.

Just then, Reggie walked out of Kiara's room, still wearing the same clothes he'd had on when he left the castle earlier... except the shoulder portion of his cloak looked to be a bit darker in color than the rest, almost as though it were damp. And it definitely wasn't raining. Had that wet spot been there when he entered?

"What did you discuss with her, Your Highness?"

"An impertinent question, don't you think, Groul?" Reggie replied, and Groul fell silent.

"Don't tell me... Did they have a messy breakup?"

That would explain their midnight tryst, as well as the damp spot, if it was wet with Kiara's tears. Yes, Alan could picture it with perfect clarity.

But in his carelessness, his whisper had grown just loud enough for the others to hear, because Reggie turned back and spotted him standing there.

“Y-You sure got back late, didn’t you?” Alan stammered hastily.

“Yeah. I was with the margrave, investigating the murder of his subordinates. I’ll tell you all the details at another time, but suffice it to say, this is turning into a rather serious matter. I wouldn’t be surprised if His Lordship recruited you to assist us first thing tomorrow.”

“Ugh... You know I’m terrible at strategizing.”

Especially when it came to conflicts between the noble houses. There was never any direct confrontation; instead, it always involved games of 4-D chess, so to speak. Fortunately, the annoyance inspired by this thought was enough to overwrite his prior panic.

“Consider it a practice run for your future reign as the next margrave! You might as well get acclimated to it now. And I know you’re not *completely* awful at strategic thinking, so don’t pretend otherwise.”

“It just doesn’t come naturally to me, that’s all. And when I compare myself to those with actual talent for it, I lose the will to try. Surely you must understand that.”

By “those with talent,” he was, of course, referring to Reggie.

“If you said that to your father, I wager he’d smack you one.”

“I’m more afraid of what my *mother* would think, to be frank. Believe it or not, she’s far more violent than he is. Honestly, which one of them wears the pants in their relationship?” Alan joked.

Reggie grinned.

“I still think you ought to familiarize yourself with the duties of a margrave. Your father and I won’t always be around to help you, you know. How will you survive when you’re on your own?”

Alan blinked at the dark implications of Reggie’s question. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just a little advice. Nothing in this world lasts forever, Alan. Not me, and

certainly not you. So it's better to be safe than sorry."

But this did nothing to assuage Alan's discomfort, and he couldn't help but press the issue further.

"I'll accept that you can't stay here forever. But if you won't be around, as you claim, then what will Kiara do without you?"

For once, he seemed to catch Reggie off-guard. The prince's eyes widened. "What's she got to do with this?"

"What are you—I mean, you...!" Alan started to point out how he'd just witnessed the other boy waltzing out of her room, then thought better of it. "You seem quite fond of her, and she's rather attached to you as well. Besides, she's your responsibility, you know, since you *took her in* and all that."

"Kiara's more independent than you give her credit for. She'll be just fine without me."

Alan scowled.

"Come on, Reggie. Admit that you like her! I reckon you could spend your whole day with her and never once complain. If that isn't fondness, I don't know what is!"

But Reggie didn't so much as flinch. "Sure, she's a great girl, and we always have an easy time when we're together. But, well, I'm not sure she would approve."

What's that supposed to mean? Alan wondered. Reggie found her charming and wanted to spend time with her, yet the decision was in *her* hands? Furthermore, this didn't completely answer his questions. He was trying to ask whether their relationship was romantic in nature, and yet it felt as though Reggie had dodged with all the grace of a swan.

Every now and then, His Princeliness liked to speak in riddles... probably because he was used to people backstabbing him whenever he was candid with them. But Alan knew this was a sign that Reggie was still in the middle of making a decision about something. More than likely, he'd just asked the question a bit too early.

The question is: what is he trying to decide, and how? Was he trying to determine whether to keep Kiara around? Whether to maintain a friendly distance to prevent himself from getting too hurt when it came time for him to leave? Either way, Alan knew it would be pointless to try to pry further. He let out a sigh.

“Well, at any rate, if you need anything, just say the word. Kiara’s one of our staff now, so even if you need to cut ties with her, she’ll be perfectly safe with us.”

Then Reggie’s expression turned strangely grave. “Listen, Alan... Cutting ties with her would be no different than cutting off my own arm.”

“Cutting off your arm? You can’t be serious!”

Alan balked. Surely that had to be an exaggeration. Why, he made it sound as though he could scarcely go on living without her!

“So no, I’m not going to cut ties with her. Not unless I’m left with no other option. And if things start looking dicey, I imagine I’ll take her away with me. That way she won’t be a burden on you.”

“Reggie...”

How far are you willing to take her? Alan wanted to ask... but he knew if he did, he wouldn’t like the answer.



The next day, Alan spotted Kiara with her eyes all puffy like she’d been crying. This only served to further confuse him.

“There was no breakup... right?”

After all, Reggie had likened her to his own flesh and blood. But if not, then what had made her cry? Since Alan had no idea how to handle a weepy woman, he kept his distance until the puffiness receded—though his mind remained decidedly fixated on her at all times.

Even more confusing was that Reggie and Kiara never seemed to interact in a flirtatious manner.

But before Alan’s questions could be answered, the day of Reggie’s departure

rolled around.

The weather was getting colder here in the Évrard domain, and today marked the first signs of snowfall for the season. If Reggie stayed any longer, the snow would significantly hinder his journey back to the palace; hence, he was advised to return without further delay.

“You’ll see me again soon, don’t you worry,” Reggie grinned, his breath escaping his lips in a white fog as he addressed Alan and Kiara. “Especially you, Alan—I imagine we’ll get a chance to speak at the New Year’s celebration. You *are* coming to that, right?”

“Of course I am.”

“Good! Until then, I place Kiara in your care.” He leaned in and whispered, “Don’t let those vermin lay a single hand on my baby.”

At this, Alan finally found the answer to his quandary.

Oh, I get it. He sees her as his daughter!

That would explain why he hovered over her so much, and why he talked as though she was his highest priority. Plenty of fathers would willingly lay down their lives for their children, after all. He probably went into her room to calm her down after the ambush. It all made sense!

Relieved to have his answers at last, Alan saw Reggie off with a beatific grin. Then he turned to Kiara next to him, who was looking less than enthusiastic.

“Hang in there, Kiara. He’ll be back before you know it.”

“Huh?”

She looked confused at first, but in the end, she smiled.



And so, on the cusp of winter’s chill, Reggie headed home to the palace.

I knew he would have to leave eventually; it was probably less than ideal that he’d been absent for as long as he had. After all, he’d spent a full month here at the castle, and before that, he’d gone to pick up Alan at the boarding school, and now he had a long journey by carriage ahead of him... All in all, he would’ve

been away from the palace for about two months. And considering how much time it took to get here and back, it made sense that he could only make the trip once a year.

Honestly, I was sad to have to say goodbye to the friend who understood me more than anyone. The unspoken connection we had was rare and precious.

And besides... Well, how do I put this...

In my past life, I'd never experienced anything quite like this. And in my present life (at least, until recently) I'd been entirely focused on staying alive. I knew if I told someone in my past life about a situation like this, they'd think it was all in my head... *No, no, no! If this was Japan, surely no one would kiss a girl they weren't interested in!*

Truth be told, I'd been agonizing over it ever since the night it happened. Once my tears dried and I came back to my senses, I realized I didn't know how to interpret Reggie's behavior.

If we were in Japan, I would've taken it as a sign of romantic interest without ever pausing to think about my "position" or my "worth." But Farzia was more like a European country in its sensibilities, and parents kissed their children on the cheek all the time, regardless of age. I'd seen siblings do it, too. Hence, a cheek kiss didn't hold that much significance here. Yes, it was a perfectly normal interaction, provided you thought of each other as family... right?

However, I hadn't had much in the way of a proper family in this life, so I didn't have much confidence in that regard. My birth father had barely spoken to me... Perhaps my mother kissed me while she was alive, but if so, I couldn't remember it—I was a toddler at the time. My stepmother never physically touched me whatsoever, and as for the count, he treated me like a servant. As a result, I had no idea what a *normal* Farzian family was like.

Besides, more than anything, I needed Reggie and Lord Évrard to survive the next two years. Until then, I had my work cut out for me... and the thought was paralyzing.

For the time being, however, the Évrard estate was my home. I had made the decision to work here, and I was going to give it my very best. Our main priority at the moment, of course, was the aftermath of the ambush. When His Lordship

sent word to the Patriciél estate to protest the unjust attack, he received in reply a message that stated the soldiers had simply “made a mistake,” and that the House of Évrard was free to punish them as necessary.

Lord Évrard responded by pointing out that one of the men appeared to be a defective spellcaster, but naturally, the House of Patriciél feigned complete ignorance of the matter. I could have testified to the contrary, of course, but such testimony was useless coming from me, since I wasn’t supposed to be here in the first place. In the end, His Lordship seemingly gave up.

That left one other problem: the men who had murdered the margrave’s informants had yet to be caught. And because we had yet to explain the abnormally high number of spellcasters wandering around, Lord Évrard was starting to think there was some larger conspiracy at play.

The five of us had gathered together—Lord and Lady Évrard, Alan, myself, and Wentworth for security purposes—to discuss the matter in detail.

“What sort of conspiracy, milord?” asked Alan. His father grimaced.

“According to the detainee, he was transformed into a defective spellcaster by imbibing a magical potion of some kind. As such, I’m of the belief that Lord Patriciél can mass-produce them at will. And though these poor souls are fated to die rather quickly, they still offer considerable firepower for a short time... With that in mind, it’s possible he intends to start a war to overturn the kingdom.”

At the word *war*, we all drew in a breath.

“If Lord Patriciél is involved, would that mean Llewyne is behind it? But their princess has become our queen! Surely they have no motive to attack!” Lady Évrard protested.

Her husband shook his head. “But the queen remains without an heir. She only sees the king during morning prayer, or so I’m told. Without a direct descendant, Llewyne will have trouble seizing complete control of the Farzian throne. Alternatively... perhaps their strategy was to wage war all along, and they only sent us their princess as a diversionary tactic.”

Yes! Exactly! I thought to myself. This was precisely how the story went in the

RPG I played. First, Llewyrne sent their princess to infiltrate the palace, then they cozied up to a handful of Farzian noble houses, all the while waiting for the perfect opportunity to set their plans into motion. As a result, Llewyrne had no trouble invading Farzia and attacking the House of Évrard. This was the setup for the main plot of the game.

“Then why target us?” asked Wentworth.

“Even if they succeeded in assassinating the prince, there are other young men in line for the throne,” His Lordship replied.

Wentworth’s expression turned sour. “You mean... Lord Alan.”

Thinking back, Wentworth had appeared in the RPG, too. As a knight, he was a mounted unit, which meant he could travel a greater distance than the average foot soldier. This frequently came in handy, and as a result, I’d deployed him quite often. But he wasn’t the only knight available, and so I’d ultimately forgotten his name.

From there, His Lordship explained the motives a pro-Llewyrne faction might have for attacking the House of Évrard, and I wondered if perhaps it was Reggie who clued him in to all this. If so, I was immensely grateful. Compared to my “prophetic dream” nonsense, this realistic approach was far more palatable for the average person.

But this wasn’t the only thing Reggie had passed on for me.

“Now, if that was all I wanted to discuss, then I wouldn’t have requested Kiara’s presence. Unfortunately, she’s in something of a precarious position.”

Here we go, I thought to myself as my shoulders tensed up. Everyone turned to look at me as I stood behind Her Ladyship.

“I’m told Kiara has previously consumed the same potion as the detainee.”

“Wait, what? But then... is she...?”

Alan’s eyes widened in shock as Lady Évrard blinked back tears. He rose to his feet, stormed over, and grabbed me by the wrist.

“Why didn’t you tell us?! Are you going to be okay?! What am I supposed to tell Reggie?!”

I didn't understand what Reggie had to do with it, but I could plainly see that Alan was concerned for me, and it was... really touching, actually. It meant a lot to me that the two closest friends I had were both accepting of me without hesitation.

Meanwhile, Lord and Lady Évrard exchanged a look, wiping away their tears. *Uh, guys? I haven't died yet! And I'm not looking to change that! That's kind of the whole reason I came here!* But I couldn't tell them that, of course. *It's so exhausting having to watch what I say.*

Wentworth folded his arms and adopted a contemplative pose. "You're not really going to ask that of a child, are you?" he murmured. Evidently the pieces were falling into place for him, and it didn't sit well with his conscience. *I swear, this castle is staffed with nothing but kind, compassionate people.*

"Either she happened to have the right constitution for it, or she got lucky and the potion didn't take. Regardless, she seems to be in perfect health," the margrave explained. "So far she doesn't seem capable of casting spells, nor was she told that the drink was related to magic in the first place. Isn't that right, Kiara?"

I nodded quietly and let him do the talking.

"Even supposing she drank the exact same potion as the defective in the dungeon, we can't say for sure that it's what turned him. We can't test the theory without a sample, and frankly, we don't even know if he was telling the truth in the first place."

Just to be safe, however, His Lordship asked me not to leave the castle for any reason until things had settled, then requested the margravine's cooperation in keeping me indoors.

"His Highness the prince has entrusted her into our care, so I ask that you all look out for her to the best of your ability."

And so I was forbidden to set foot outside Évrard Castle. Those who weren't as intimately familiar with my circumstances were informed by Her Ladyship that "the poor thing's simply too frightened to leave the castle after that ambush, so we've decided to give her room to heal for a while." Naturally, no one questioned this. If anything, they seemed to feel sorry for me, since I was

cooped up indoors.

Three months later, the remains of a defective spellcaster were discovered on a rocky riverbank in Évrard territory. And by “remains,” I mean a pile of clothes filled with sand. Within the area was a single corpse, charred beyond all recognition. But because the spellcaster’s remains were several days (or possibly even months) old by the time they were discovered, much of the sand had already mixed with the earth around it.

My confinement to the castle continued another month after that while His Lordship tightened surveillance around the estate. Then, once he was reasonably confident that no suspicious individuals were in the area, I was finally freed from what was essentially house arrest.

That said, I was still an attendant in service to the margravine. And since I could neither wield a sword nor ride a horse, I generally didn’t expect to have to accompany Her Ladyship on her patrols outside.

But that was where my expectations betrayed me.



It was on the first day of spring, when the snow had finally melted.

“Let’s go outside, Kiara. You and me!” exclaimed the margravine.

“But... what if we’re attacked, milady?” I asked timidly. *In the event of another ambush, I might very well run screaming from this accursed castle altogether.*

But Lady Évrard simply grinned. “Oh, relax. Trust me, they’ll know better than to try any funny business while I’m around. Besides, as my attendant, there may come a time when I’ll need you to run a message somewhere. I’d like to make sure you’re acquainted with all the guards and servants so they’ll recognize you.”

And so it was decided that I would accompany Lady Évrard on an excursion alongside two other attendants, Maya and Clara, plus two knights for added protection. And since I couldn’t ride a horse on my own, I rode with Maya on hers.

Maya had served Lady Évrard since before her marriage to the margrave. Tall and strong, she was the daughter of a merchant family; apparently Her Ladyship had hired Maya on the spot after watching her carry her father's wares. *Sounds like her, alright.* Nearly twenty years later and her hiring preferences hadn't changed a bit.

With each trip we made, we went a little farther... until we eventually rode all the way to the border walls and back. And over that time, I learned how to ride a horse all on my own.

Later that year, in the fall, Reggie returned to Évrard Castle for just two weeks. True to his word, he had done some digging while he was away; he informed me that a spellcaster who had previously visited the royal palace had now gone missing. Then he was gone again, and in his place, winter arrived.

The province of Évrard saw a fair bit of snowfall, which helped defend against potential invasions from Llewyrne. But though peace reigned, I never once forgot about magic. I needed a trump card, after all—something I could reach for as a last resort. Problem being, of course, that I couldn't exactly go rifling through the margrave's library on my own. Plus, I'd promised Reggie I wouldn't go behind his back.

It was around that time that the Évrard family headed off to the palace to attend the New Year's banquet, just as they'd done the previous year—except this year, Alan had turned sixteen, and so he was formally invited in his own right. He did not, however, seem enthusiastic about this.

Left behind at the castle, I spent my free time talking to my new friends: the middle-aged servants I'd first met in the dining hall. We'd chat about the castle or the surrounding towns, and once I was done eating, Harris, the chef's apprentice, would come over to ask me if I wanted seconds—something he started asking me ever since he saw me scarf down my food that one time.

When Alan returned home, he came bearing a letter from Reggie. In it, Reggie informed me that he'd sent a messenger to speak with the Thorn Princess.

“What?! You're kidding... Why would he do that?!”

I was shocked. What's more, Reggie had gone out of his way to enlist a child from a nearby village to carry out the task. *That wily fox!* I could only imagine

how easy it must have been to lure the princess out with an innocent little voice calling her name.

Apparently, Reggie had wanted to ask her about spellcasters—how they were born, how they died, and whether Lord Patriciél’s concoction did indeed aid in the process. The Thorn Princess’s response was something along the lines of “Tell Kiara I said ‘Why do you think I gave you that stone? And don’t you dare attempt to use anything else.’”

Sorry, but... I don’t understand what that’s supposed to mean!

Unfortunately, Reggie didn’t seem to, either. All he wrote alongside it was “Does this make sense to you?”

Either way, it seemed to suggest that as long as I kept the necklace close at hand, the rest would work itself out in time. Surely the Pedo Princess wouldn’t lie to us, seeing as we went out of our way to indulge her... interests. Unfortunately, she didn’t seem inclined to give us anything more to go on. All we knew for sure was that we needed the necklace—but not where or when or how to use it.

Once spring arrived, Reggie came to stay again—this time for just a week—and it turned out he’d reached the same conclusion I had.

“I get the feeling there’s a reason she can’t go into more detail,” Reggie explained.

For privacy’s sake, we were sitting atop a large boulder on a low knoll a short distance from the castle. Looking at him, it quickly became apparent that he’d had another growth spurt. He was already half a head taller than me the last time I saw him back in autumn, but even factoring in the height I’d gained myself, that gap had now *doubled*. Not only that, but his face had become more angular, trading in the last traces of his cherubic boyishness for chiseled, Adonis-like proportions. His shoulders were broader, and when I stood in front of him, he felt like a massive wall towering over me. His personality had matured as well.

I’d watched Alan shoot up like a beanstalk over the past year, so I’d had *some* idea of what to expect, but still... For some reason, it felt like Reggie was a whole different person now, and that in turn made me feel a bit shy around

him. The end result was a whole lot of awkwardness. Good thing I insisted on riding my own horse up here, or it might've been even worse.

Not to mention, when I first sat down on this rock, I'd intentionally given him some space, but then he'd *scooted closer*! Admittedly, we'd sat this close back in the Forest of the Thorn Princess when I was fourteen. The memory tickled my heart... but I made sure not to let it show on my face, of course.

"Do you think that perhaps she's bound by some sort of restriction unique to spellcasters?" I asked him.

"It certainly appears that way. Nevertheless, she claims all you need is the stone, so I think it's safe to say you won't be dying a defective's death... You haven't been messing around with any magic while I've been gone, have you?"

"No. Without you around, I can't even go into the library to do research."

I'd been behaving myself according to his wishes, but only because there was no other option available to me. Truth be told, there *were* times when I tested to see if I could cast any spells. But nothing happened, even when I made sure to read the spell's name out loud. One time Maya caught me doing it, too... but I wasn't going to mention any of this to Reggie.

"Is that so? I admit, Alan's testified to that effect himself, but I still can't help but worry." His expression clouded over as he placed a hand on mine.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! You can't do that! You've got two of your knight-guards watching us, remember?! All this secret hand-touching is gonna give them the wrong idea about our relationship!

Under the faint spring sun, the rock's surface was tepid at best, but Reggie's hand was toasty warm. My heart fluttered in my chest, and my pulse raced like I'd just run a marathon. I was so lightheaded, in fact, I ended up asking him flat-out.

"So, uh, Reggie? What's with the hand?"

"Oh, I'm just checking."

"For what?!"

"Don't worry about it."

What's THAT supposed to mean?! I know you're implying SOMETHING, but I don't know what!

Since he could only stay at the castle for seven days, he didn't have much free time to chat with me. And just like that, he was gone again.

Fortunately, Reggie was a smart guy, and over the course of his trip here and back, he managed to secure not just one, but *two* noble houses as allies—Alan told me all about it. In the RPG, those particular houses were unaffiliated with either side of the war, and as a result, they were wiped out by Llewynian forces. Knowing Reggie, he'd probably sown a few seeds here and there to encourage them to officially choose a side, but they'd consistently ignored his advances. Now, however, they'd suddenly changed their tune. To me, that was the *real* magic.

How did he pull it off? I'll have to ask him next time I see him. Wait...

"There's only half a year left?"

Only six months remained until the date of the fateful autumn battle in which Reggie was destined to lose his life. And if all proceeded according to the RPG script, I wouldn't see him again until then. Panic set in, and I was gripped with restless dread. Yet all I could do was trust in the Thorn Princess and hold tight to my necklace. She was my only source of information, and if she wasn't going to spill any more beans, then my only option was to sit and wait. Not like I was free to leave the province of my own volition.

The days passed uneventfully until the start of summer. Perhaps everyone had simply lowered their guard by then.

I was accompanying Lady Évrard to the margrave's branch estate in the northern part of the province when a brand-new crisis arose.

Chapter 3: Struck Too Soon

After receiving word that a suspicious individual had been captured, we departed for the northern estate in order to take him into custody. Leading the charge were Lady Évrard and Alan, who was now old enough to assist his parents in an official capacity. The rest of the traveling party consisted of myself and the other attendants, three knights including Wentworth, and five soldiers for added protection.

Shortly after we arrived, they brought the man out. At a glance, he seemed like an ordinary hunter who might've crossed the border by mistake; his hair was messy, and he wore a fur pelt to help disguise his scent. At the time he was apprehended, he was carrying a bow and quiver, neither of which seemed very suspicious.

But when the local soldiers approached him, he'd reacted by attacking with his hunting knife—so they'd arrested him right away. Afterward, they noticed that there were a number of wolf corpses within the surrounding area. Their maws were stained with a reddish fluid too watery to be blood... and the hunter was found in possession of several vials with trace amounts of red fluid at the bottom.

The soldiers had decided this fluid was probably poison, and so they'd sent word to the main estate. And when Lord Évrard had read about the vials of red fluid, it brought to mind the defective spellcaster. Unfortunately, His Lordship already had plans to visit another noble house that day. Thus, it was the margravine (and the future margrave) who went in his stead.

Prior to our arrival, we geared up in anticipation that the detainee would struggle, or more spellcasters would show themselves. But as it turned out, the transfer was relatively uneventful. The man in question seemed mentally defeated; while he refused to answer any questions, neither did he lash out. Then we confiscated the vials, and all that remained was to head home and investigate. Our job was essentially done. We stayed at the branch estate for

two days for socializing purposes, and after that, it was time to head south once more.

In order to arrive home before sundown, we packed up early that morning. While Lady Évrard finished her breakfast, we loaded up the carriages; afterward, I brushed and braided Her Ladyship's silky silver hair. This was one of my duties as an attendant.

In a world without rubber hair ties, braiding was a rather difficult process, but with a little elbow grease and the help of a few hair sticks, I managed to achieve a style Her Ladyship loved. She smiled and admired her hair in the mirror.

"How I wish I could wear my hair like yours. It would be so much simpler," she mused.

"Such a plain hairstyle would be unbecoming of your station, milady."

She was referring, of course, to my usual half-ponytail. The margravine seemed to find intricate hairstyles to be pretty, but otherwise impractical; she generally wore her hair in a plain bun or whatever would keep it out of her face while she was riding on horseback.

"Though I'm sure you could try it out once we're back at the castle," I added belatedly.

"Perhaps I will. And as for you, Kiara, perhaps you ought to try wearing your hair up more often now that you're sixteen! I wouldn't mind matching with you at our next social engagement."

I was fourteen when I first arrived at Évrard Castle; then I turned fifteen that same winter, and now another birthday had passed. Both times, the residents of the castle were kind enough to celebrate it with me.

Of course, my sixteenth birthday celebration paled in comparison to Alan's, which had come much sooner than mine. He was the heir to the House of Évrard, after all. People were invited from all around the province to come and enjoy a night of feast and drink. When I heard the kitchen was shorthanded, I sat in the corner and peeled potatoes like a woman crazed—that is, until Alan came looking for me. He seemed to think it was proof of my tragic childhood that I knew how to peel potatoes at all, but I'd actually picked it up from the

one person who *wasn't* abusive to me: my birth mother.

Once we were ready to go, I accompanied Lady Évrard outside, where she and I and the other attendants boarded the passenger carriage. Alan, Wentworth and the other knights mounted their horses. As for the soldiers, one of them was assigned to drive the passenger carriage, another was to drive the covered carriage containing our detainee, and the remaining three rode on horseback.

As we rolled along, I was contemplating which of my tasks I would prioritize when we arrived back at the castle when...

“Whoa!”

“What’s going on?!”

All of a sudden, the carriage braked hard, and the back of my head collided with the wall. *Ouch*. I clutched my head and groaned.

The next thing I knew, Lady Évrard had stepped out of the carriage.

“Your Ladyship!”

“Maya, stay with Kiara! Clara, come with me. We’ve got windwolves—five of them, by the looks of it. Nothing you and I can’t handle on our own!”

“As you command, milady!”

“Wait, what?!”

But before I could process what was happening, Clara disappeared through the door of the carriage. *Uh, guys? Are you sure we should be sending the margravine out to do battle? Isn’t she priority number one here?!*

Truth be told, Her Ladyship handled a great number of dangerous duties on par with any knight—patrols, monster extermination, and more. Perhaps everyone had simply come to expect that she could hold her own in combat.

“Wait... Why would there be windwolves here?”

I could remember a fair few details about windwolves, since they were an enemy type I had encountered in the RPG. They detested the scent of humans, and as such, they avoided areas people frequented, including the high road we were presently traveling. Usually, they only attacked if someone entered their

territory.

As their name suggested, these wolflike creatures could harness the power of the wind, specifically while running. They attacked by kicking up blinding whirlwinds, which made dealing with them a hassle. Naturally, the most effective strategy against a windwolf was to injure its legs so it couldn't run.

"How is the wind *this* strong?!"

The whole carriage was nearly rattling off its chassis.

"I've never seen anything like it," Maya frowned, one hand hovering over the hilt of her sword.

Normally, a windwolf's whirlwind was only strong enough to temporarily blind someone; in the game, this was a status effect that lowered attack accuracy for three turns. Whenever I fought them, I used hit-and-run tactics, and as soon as any of my units were blinded, I had them hide behind my backup fighters. This was the strategy all the walkthroughs recommended.

But here in reality, our carriage was rocking like a rowboat on the high seas. Outside, someone let out a scream, but I was in no position to look out the window and check. All I could do was cling to my seat for dear life.

Just then, someone—or something—crashed into the side of the carriage, and this time it was *my* turn to scream. The whole vehicle was going to topple over onto its side!

"Miss Kiara!"

Desperate, I scrambled my way up and threw myself against the door on the opposite side of the cabin. Miraculously, my added weight was just enough to act as a counterbalance, and the carriage managed to right itself once more.

When it did, however, gravity flung me right out through the door, because I'd forgotten that it was the kind that opened outwards.

"Guh!"

There I was, once again disgracefully tumbling to the ground—but this was no time for propriety. Once I made sure my skirt hadn't flipped up, I rose to my feet with the intention of retreating back into the carriage.

And that was when I saw it.

“Your Ladyship!”

A short distance away from the carriage, Lady Évrard was sprawled on the ground... and a windwolf had sunk its teeth into her calf.

“Mother!”

Alan raced over and slashed at the brute with his sword. The wolf gave a yelp and leapt back, but despite its wounds, it looked ready to come charging in for more.

Grimacing in pain, Lady Évrard hauled herself to her feet. The wolf had torn clear through the skirt of her dress, and I could see she was badly bleeding.

“The margravine is injured?”

That wasn’t in the game at all!

In the RPG, right before Alan first deployed his troops in a counterattack against Llewyne, there was a short scene between him and his mother that took place at a fortress in another province. Hence, I’d assumed she was never in any danger. In fact, that was part of the reason I was so surprised when I found out she could fight. After all, that was the only time I saw her during the entire game.

But if Her Ladyship was so combat-capable, then why on earth didn’t she join Alan’s party as a playable character? She would’ve known her son was risking his life to fight in the war. Rather than sit around in safety and let someone else handle it, she would sooner take up the mantle and lead the charge herself.

“Maybe she couldn’t?”

What if she was forced to stay behind... because of an injury?

Sensing that she was too wounded to fight, Her Ladyship began to retreat toward the carriage, dragging her bleeding leg behind her. To shield her, Alan positioned himself between her and the windwolf.

Then she spotted me staring blankly back at her.

“Kiara?! What are you doing?! Quickly! Into the carriage!”

Shaking my head, I dashed over to her. “You go in first, milady!”

With all these whirlwinds whipping around, she could barely stand, so I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Then Clara arrived to defend us.

Nearby, the knights and soldiers had all descended to the ground to fight the windwolves; on horseback, it would’ve been nearly impossible to hit their targets. Fortunately, their injuries were slight at worst. Meanwhile, the horses had all gathered behind the luggage carriage... but strangely enough, although horses were among the most common prey animals of the windwolf, these ones didn’t afford our horses even a passing glance.

This registered to me as peculiar, but frankly I was too busy pushing Her Ladyship into the carriage to think much of it.

“Help me, Miss Maya!”

At my call, Maya came over and dragged the unwilling margravine into the carriage with her. But right as she reached out to haul me up next, my throat tightened, and my heart began to thump uncomfortably hard. Reflexively, I glanced back.

“Miss Kiara!”

Screaming my name, Clara plunged a sword into a windwolf that had lunged for me. It collapsed to the ground, where it spasmed and... looked up directly at me. Was it targeting me specifically?

“Miss Kiara, hurry! Get in here!”

“Right—whoa!”

But before I could climb aboard, another windwolf suddenly leapt onto the roof of the carriage, aided by the wind. The resulting whirlwind knocked me off my feet and caused Clara to stumble as well.

Then the windwolf leapt off the carriage... aiming for me.

“What?!”

I was too startled to think straight. I was right—the wolves were targeting me! I froze, staring into the wolf’s open mouth full of pointed fangs.

But right in the nick of time, someone jumped in front of me—someone wearing a black cloak over a dark green jacket. With his sword, he slashed the wolf clean in half, its blood splattering in every direction. Then he turned back to frown at me, and I realized it was Wentworth.

Nearby, I spotted Alan—maybe he'd attempted to come to my aid as well. Near the luggage carriage, the soldiers were blocking other wolves from heading in my direction. There could be no doubt about it: these creatures were gunning for me, and me alone.

But we were at a stark disadvantage. The windwolves were agile creatures; boosted by the wind, they could come flying from any direction. But our soldiers were obligated to remain stationary to protect me and the carriage.

Wait. What if I could herd them?

I rose to my feet, and my legs firmly supported my weight. Clara stared at me in shock as I proceeded to hike up my skirt and tie it at my knees to keep it out of my way... and then I took off running.



“Miss Kiara!” Clara shrieked.

At this, Alan turned to look. “What the... What are you doing?!”

I didn’t have time to respond. Instead, I ran around behind the carriage... and once I saw the three remaining wolves leap over the knights’ heads in my direction, I turned back and ran past Alan into the nearby thicket.

“Sir Wentworth, move one pace forward! Sir Lyle and Lord Alan, stay where you are for a pincer attack!”

Run! Run like your life depends on it, Kiara!

I zigzagged back and forth between the trees. Sure enough, the windwolves followed me—one at a time, like ducks in a row. In this thicket, the trees grew too densely for the wolves to use their wind, and so they were forced to follow me on foot. At this rate, however, they were going to catch up to me.

I dashed out of the thicket, passed between Lyle and Alan, and ran around behind Wentworth. The wolves followed right along behind.

“I see now,” Wentworth murmured, seemingly having picked up on my plan. Then he stepped forward and speared the first windwolf on his sword. Its corpse then blocked the path for the other two wolves, which came to a stop just in time for Alan and Lyle to finish them off.

But I wasn’t done running, because two more windwolves were approaching from a different direction. My lungs were threatening to burst, but I couldn’t risk another klutzy tumble to the ground or I was dead meat.

“Help me!”

I dashed behind three of the soldiers, who still seemed shocked that these windwolves would seek to attack me specifically for no apparent reason. But when the two additional wolves came up behind me, they switched gears in time to knock them to the ground. There, Alan and Lyle ran up in time to land the finishing blow.

Oh, thank goodness.

I knew that if I was the target, they would prioritize blindly chasing me over all else, even if doing so was tricky in a congested grove of trees. That’s how I was

able to manipulate their behavior to my advantage in order to prevent them from making use of their wind magic.

Plus, Alan and the others were skilled enough that they could easily dispatch an enemy that wasn't paying attention. Thus, I served as a decoy so the others could finish the job.

With all the wolves defeated, I collapsed to my knees, propping myself upright with my hands. Finally, we were safe... but I was too out of breath to rejoice just yet. As I wheezed, I untied my skirt and covered my legs once more.

"You *imbecile!*" Alan roared, sword in hand, his shoulders heaving. I flinched in fear, but he didn't relent. "Why would you knowingly put yourself in danger when you can't defend yourself?! You could have died!"

"We were in trouble! *Anyone* could have died!"

We were all injured, the margravine included. If I hadn't done what I did, our chances would have been exceptionally grim. The way things stood now, Lady Évrard wouldn't be able to walk on that leg for at least a month—and it easily could have been far, far worse. If I'd obeyed her and gone back into the carriage, the wolves would have torn open the vehicle, and Her Ladyship would have been forced to fight while injured.

At the very least, the game version of her was *definitely* more critically wounded. That would explain why she hadn't joined Alan's party.

So yeah, anyone here could have died—and we needed as many soldiers as we could get for the upcoming fight against Llewyr.

This wasn't even the worst possible outcome, either. If I was right in thinking that this leg injury was what kept Lady Évrard out of the war in the RPG, then that meant she would probably be too wounded to defend the castle from the siege as well. And there was no telling when Llewyr would strike. Just because they attacked in the fall in the RPG didn't guarantee they wouldn't turn up sooner in real life.

That said, we had yet to hear any word from the nation of Salekhard. So what would bring Reggie out to our neck of the woods?

Regardless, I knew I couldn't explain my actions to Alan's satisfaction. As I

stared down at the ground, however, I felt a gentle hand touch my shoulder.

“Are you hurt, Miss Kiara?”

I looked up to find that it was Wentworth, looking back at me with his usual staid composure. I shook my head. He turned to Alan.

“What’s done is done, milord. There’s no sense in reprimanding her now.”

“But—”

“Thanks to her, the crisis was resolved... and in record time. For now, let us hurry away from this place posthaste; the smell of blood may lure in other beasts, and we cannot afford further delays. We must treat Her Ladyship’s wounds at once.”

Alan’s eyes widened in realization, and he nodded quietly. “You’re right, Wentworth. Kiara, I was too harsh with you, but I do hope you’ll explain yourself once we’re home.”

I nodded and rose to my feet. When I approached the carriage, Clara reached out and helped me inside, all the while frowning at me with concern.

“Are you alright, Kiara?” asked the margravine.

I smiled at her. “Yes, milady. The windwolves have all been slain. Now, let’s hurry back to the castle.”

As I helped Maya administer first aid, I contemplated how I was going to explain my actions to Alan later. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived at the castle that evening, nothing plausible had come to mind.

As soon as we stepped out of the carriage, the entire castle burst into an uproar: the margravine was wounded! So wounded, she could barely walk! This was quite possibly the most injured they’d ever seen her.

Even His Lordship was completely flustered. Though he appeared calm on the outside, he hovered at his wife’s side at all times, refusing to leave her as he barked various orders: treatment for the wounded, retrieval and dissection of the windwolves’ corpses, interrogation of the detainee, and so on. It was obvious just how protective he was of his beloved, and it put a smile on our faces.

He continued to stay with her long after her treatment was finished, and while she seemed to appreciate this, I got the sense that she thought he was overreacting just a teensy bit.

“All we can do now is give it time and wait for my leg to heal, darling. Your hovering won’t make it happen any faster.”

“But...”

He fell silent, but otherwise refused to budge. And so it was decided that the rest of the castle would give the two lovebirds some time together.

Now that we’d explained the details of what had happened, the rest of us were free to go, so I followed the other attendants out of the room. As I walked down the hallway, I contemplated having dinner, since it’d gotten so late—but I only made it a few steps before someone grabbed me by the wrist. I whirled around to find Alan standing there, his expression hard.

“Hold it, Kiara. We need to talk.”

And given the look on his face, I could tell that he wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

He led me up to the top of a corner tower built into the external curtain wall surrounding the castle proper. The place was deserted, since our sentries were posted in the much higher main tower. Admittedly it was a safe place to hold a private conversation, but as the daylight was rapidly fading, I felt it was a bit too chilly to be ideal.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, Alan was already at the edge of the tower, peering down. And once I took a few steps toward him, he turned around to face me.

“First things first: don’t hike up your skirt like that. Keep your legs covered. Or have you no shame?” he growled, frowning.

“Oh, *that’s* what you’re mad about?” I muttered. But the fact of the matter remained that I had committed an egregious faux pas. “Well, uh, I apologize for... the unsightly display, I suppose. If you could keep it a secret from Her Ladyship, I would sincerely appreciate it.”

Every time I gained a new memory of my past life, my sensibilities shifted more and more to match *that* world, not this one. Hence, I no longer saw bare legs as shameful. Still, just because *I* didn't find it offensive didn't mean other people felt the same, so I apologized. After all, I wasn't eager to lose my job.

He blinked at me. "Unsightly?"

"Well, surely it must have disgusted you to lay eyes on some random woman's body, did it not?"

Perhaps if he were attracted to me it would be a different story, but obviously that wasn't the case. Thus, I imagined I must have made him uncomfortable.

"That's not the part I'd be worried about if I were you."

"Really? Surely there are some legs no man would want to see under any circumstances."

"Such as?"

"Wouldn't you rather view the legs of a pretty girl? At your age, I wouldn't be surprised to learn you'd snuck a peek once or twice before. And my legs tend to swell, so I wager they're not quite up to your standards."

"What are you talking about? That was my first time ever seeing *any* girl's—I mean, uh, this isn't about the theoretical quality of your legs!"

All in all, he seemed quite flustered. *Does he realize what he just said? That's kind of cute, actually.* I decided to apologize again in case the first one didn't stick.

"Well, in any case, I sincerely apologize for my impropriety. That *is* what this is about, correct?"

"Perhaps it's a bad idea to explain to you exactly where my problem lies... So be it. Just don't tell Reggie, alright?"

What does Reggie have to do with this? I tilted my head. Surely it wasn't worth telling him. After all, it was an emergency situation, and I was wearing my walking boots at the time, and having my skirt down would've made it harder to run, and if I'd stumbled, I would've been wolf food. Surely a little exposed leg was preferable to *that* grisly alternative.

Regardless, I agreed to his request. He sighed heavily.

“Now then, let’s get down to business.”

Reflexively, I straightened my posture.

“Why were those windwolves after you specifically?”

In response, I gave him the answer I’d prepared in advance: “I’m not sure, but I suspect it was because I looked to be the weakest.”

After all, I was the only one not wielding a weapon. And the wolves could likely tell that I was the slowest, clumsiest one. Hence, I figured I could use it as an excuse. Honestly, my success back there was almost entirely luck. One wrong move and I would’ve been torn apart.

Alan didn’t seem convinced.

“That can’t be right. If they were targeting the weakest, then they would’ve all converged on my mother once she was injured. But no—even then, they were focused on you. And yet you *knew* they would chase you, or else you wouldn’t have done what you did.”

Defeated, I hung my head.

“I think that perhaps... they were fed the same potion as the defective spellcaster.”

“The red potion?”

I nodded.

“I can kind of... sense it somehow,” I confessed. “Whenever I’m near a defective spellcaster, my chest gets all tight and my heart races, almost like I’m coming down with something. At first I thought I was just nervous to be around them, but then I felt the same thing when the wolves attacked... and since they all looked right at me, I’m guessing they must’ve sensed it in me, too.”

“But you’re not certain?”

“I don’t have any expert or textbook I can consult, so it’s hard to say. I asked Reggie to look into it for me, but even *he* hasn’t found anything conclusive.”

“Not even the great prince of Farzia?” At this, Alan seemed a bit more inclined

to forgive my lack of knowledge. “Still, I have to ask: why do we keep having problems with all these defective spellcasters?”

“I think it’s because we’re so close to Llewyrne.”

In the RPG, this was the protagonist’s starting point. In the story, Llewyrnian forces captured Évrard Castle, but only because it was on their way, so to speak. Plus, the prince was there.

“But if Llewyrne’s trying to invade, why not go through Erendor to the south?”

“Because they know Reggie will be here. No, wait, maybe they lure him here on purpose...?”

Naturally, it would take an international crisis to draw him all the way out. In the RPG, it was a diplomatic meeting with Salekhard that did the trick. Of course, Reggie came here at other times too, but it would be challenging for someone on the outside to anticipate his timing and plan in advance, since he was always so spontaneous with his visits. Hence, they needed to create a reason for him to show up on command.

And yet there was still no word from Salekhard—not even the smallest rumblings. That was why I’d assumed we still had time left. Instead of messing around with magic behind Reggie’s back, I trusted that he would come up with a plan.

But what if real life was starting to diverge from the plot of the RPG?

There was no dramatic windwolf scene in the game, nor any defective spellcaster characters. What if something had gone wrong with the enemy’s plans, and they’d had to change tactics?

“Maybe they’re using defective spellcasters to cause trouble near Salekhard,” I mused.

One would think that I’d have known better than to say this in front of Alan, but perhaps I was too deep in thought to realize that I’d spoken aloud.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Why would you think that, Kiara? What are you hiding? Tell me everything!”

I snapped back to my senses, and the blood drained from my face. *Oh no, how*

do I explain this? How do I explain that a war might be on its way—and ahead of the schedule I told Reggie?

Perhaps my only option was to try and explain everything to Alan so he could convince the margrave to tighten security in time.

“Well, um, this is something I discussed with Reggie, but you see...”

I gave Alan the same spiel I’d given Reggie—that I’d seen it all in a dream. But in my panic, I added a few more details this time around. I told him how the kingdom of Farzia would be forced to negotiate with Salekhard due to a series of theft and arson incidents that Llewyrne framed Farzia for. As a result, Reggie would be sent as a representative, and then Évrard Castle would be attacked. Lady Évrard would not take part in this battle, possibly because she was injured... and it was possible her injury was part of their plan all along.

“I know it’s probably just a dream, but I can’t help but worry it’s something more than that. That’s why I went to Reggie and had him convince His Lordship to prepare for a potential Llewynian raid. But now the circumstances have changed, so...”

It was possible they might strike just two months from now... or sooner. And if we didn’t prepare for it, then we wouldn’t be ready for them when they arrived. The thought terrified me, and so I ended up telling him what might happen if the castle was captured.

I was naive. I thought for sure Alan would hear me out the same way Reggie had. So when I looked up at him, I certainly wasn’t expecting to find him glaring back.

“You’re lying, aren’t you?”

“What? Wh-Why?” I stammered, perplexed.

“You claim it was all a dream, and yet you seem *convinced* it will come to pass. No, there must be some other reason. The events you describe would span several months! How many nights’ worth of dreaming was this?”

I had no answer to this. No matter how suspicious he became, Reggie had never asked me any probing questions about it. He simply trusted that I had good reason for framing it the way I did—because he could tell from the look in

my eyes that I wasn't just making stuff up. He could tell that I cared about his well-being... to the point that I was willing to sacrifice my lifespan.

But my story had too many uncertainties, and Alan was unwilling to take action on anything that wasn't grounded in fact. Unfortunately for me, nothing I could say would satisfy him. If I tried to tell him about my past life, it would only sound *more* ridiculous.

"You don't even believe in the Scriptures of Jeremiah, do you? This is the first time I've *ever* heard you talk about dream interpretation. And my mother constantly invites you to go with her to church on holy days, but you always turn her down! If you're a skeptic, as I am, then surely you wouldn't read into your dreams at all. You wouldn't endanger yourself in the waking world just because you had a nightmare once!"

He was right, of course. I certainly didn't conduct myself like a zealous Jeremian. In fact, I was downright relieved when I learned that the House of Évrard was fairly lax in their religious practices.

"To me, it would make more sense if you were still connected to the count of Patriciél. Perhaps you were sent to infiltrate the castle, but you got too attached to us, so you decided to tell us Lord Patriciél's plans by disguising it all as a dream you had. Much more realistic, wouldn't you say?"

I could understand why he would suspect that, but it simply wasn't true. If there was one thing I needed him to understand, it was that I had nothing to do with Lord Patriciél. But how could I prove to him that I wasn't his enemy?

"Please, you have to believe me!"

I wasn't smart enough to think of the perfect explanation. Instead, I fell silent.

He let out a sigh. "I can't do that, Kiara. Surely you must understand. Still, regardless of your source, it doesn't change the fact that we could be in danger. I'll go ahead and tell Father you told me all this."

I inhaled sharply. If he did that, then it would call into question everything I'd ever said. They'd all start to suspect that I was spreading lies. And if Reggie tried to vouch for me, they'd just assume I'd deceived him. The margrave wouldn't bolster the castle security, and a lot of people would die, him and Reggie

included.

I was at the end of my rope.

“What else was I supposed to do?!” I shouted, choking back a sob. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you I saw it in a past life!”

“What?”

Alan fixed me with a dubious look, but I didn’t care. He already didn’t believe a word I said, so to hell with it.

“You heard me! Before I was born, I was living a different life in a different world—and there was a story about a country with the exact same name as ours! Same people and everything! In the story, Évrard Castle got captured by Llewyne, and if I hadn’t run away from school, I would’ve ended up a spellcaster in service to the queen, and you would’ve had to kill me on the battlefield!”

Alan stared at me blankly as I poured my heart out.

“How’s that, huh?! I bet you think I’ve gone mad, don’t you?! That’s why I didn’t want to tell you in the first place!”

Unable to bear it a moment longer, I ran out of there as fast as I could and stormed down the stairs to the ground floor.

I needed a place where I could be alone, but there were sentries all over the castle. Even if I tried to hide at the top of a tower, the guardsmen were bound to find me sooner or later. Ultimately, I decided to hide in a thicket a short distance from the main estate. I sat down, buried my face in my knees, and sobbed.

After a while, I slowly regained my composure, at which point regret set in. How could I have said all that? Now Alan was only going to suspect me all the more. Would I have to leave the castle? If so, it would mean breaking my promise with Reggie. But if Alan told his father everything I said, he might suspect me of being a Patriciél spy. Then he’d write a letter to Reggie about it, and they’d throw me in the dungeon... or just exile me, if they were feeling lenient. In the end, they’d decide that my fears about Llewyne were just a crock of nonsense.

I couldn't let that happen.

"I'll just have to destroy them from the inside."

At this point, all I could do was return to the House of Patriciél, marry the viscount, and throw the rest of my life away in order to become a spellcaster. I didn't know if I could learn magic in time, but I couldn't afford to wait around anymore. The day of reckoning was just a month or two away.

"Reggie..."

My heart ached for the one person who had trusted me unconditionally. He'd once said he would rather die than let me return to the House of Patriciél, but that was the last thing I wanted. He could curse my name forevermore as long as it meant he would survive the siege.

Unconsciously, I placed a hand over the pendant concealed beneath the fabric of my dress.

"Why won't the Thorn Princess just tell me what to do?"

I needed to turn myself into a spellcaster as quickly as possible. At least then I'd be stronger. And even if they refused to believe me, I could still protect them when the time came.

Just then, I noticed something strange.

"Huh?"

I pulled the pendant out from under my dress and looked down at it. It didn't seem any different, and yet... when I closed my eyes and squeezed it, I felt something ripple outward in a perfect circle. This ripple kept going and going until I felt it "hit" something in the distance ahead and to my left.

What's happening?

It was hard to describe, since I couldn't actually see it with my own two eyes, but it felt like there was some sort of radar in my head. And whenever the ripple connected with something, my heart lurched in my chest. I'd never done this before, and I didn't really know what I was doing, but somehow I could tell.

Is this... magic?

All this time, I'd felt a similar sort of unease when I was near those windwolves and defective spellcasters, and now I felt it again. Could it mean...?

If I go in that direction, will I find a spellcaster?

As soon as the idea struck me, I headed straight back to my room and changed into horseback-riding clothes. Then I wrote a short message ("If you're reading this, assume I'm dead and don't come looking for me") and left it in a conspicuous place... You know, in case I didn't come back. After all, I was planning to approach a spellcaster with absolutely no weapons to protect myself.

I knew it was reckless. I knew I might get myself killed. That was why I wrote that note in the first place, though admittedly my hands were shaking so badly that my handwriting was rendered nigh illegible.

It would take far too long to search entirely on foot, so I led my usual horse out of the stable and hopped on. Fortunately, the gatekeeper and I were on familiar terms by now; I told him I was leaving on urgent business, and he let me pass.

As the last hint of daylight faded, I spurred my horse forward at full speed. At night, the roads were quiet; all I could hear was the faint hooting of owls. Occasionally, I would stop the horse, check the signal from the pendant, then adjust my trajectory as needed... but in the end, I turned up empty-handed.

Eventually, I decided to take a short break. I led my horse to the river for a drink, then tied it to a nearby tree. But right as I was about to sit down, I felt someone grab me by the arm.

"AAAH!"

Startled, I jumped up. Was it a bandit?! Were they targeting me because I was a lone woman?!

"It's alright, Miss Kiara! It's just me!"

The calm voice brought me back to my senses.

In the darkness, I could barely make out the features of the man's face. It was Wentworth. His dark hair and clothing blended neatly with the shadows of

night, but I could recognize his tanned skin and honey-colored eyes.

Tension set in as I remembered the circumstances I was in. Alan had told me at the start that I was forbidden from fleeing the castle lest I be seen as an enemy informant. Was Wentworth here to silence me permanently?

Then he sighed.

“I think I know what it is you’re afraid of. No, you’re not under suspicion of desertion. If anything, we’re all worried you were trying to run away from home.”

“Oh... That’s all?”

The instant I realized my fears were groundless, I collapsed into a sitting position. Naturally, since Wentworth still had me by the arm, this flustered him a bit. “Are you hurt?”

“No, not yet.”

“Hm? Well, in any case, let us return to the castle. This is no time for a young woman to be wandering around by herself.”

I appreciated his concern, but I shook my head. “I can’t go back there. I don’t think Alan or His Lordship would want me back anyway.”

After all, I was just some nutjob and/or spy. They wouldn’t believe me unless I became a spellcaster—and that was my whole reason for coming out here in the first place.

I figured Wentworth would ask me “why not?” but instead, what he said was:

“I spoke with Lord Alan before I left. He told me everything.”

“Huh?”

This was not what I was expecting, nor had I anticipated what came next.

“Furthermore, he has asked me to ask you not to go telling anyone else about it. Long story short, you don’t have to worry about him. I’ve already convinced him you’re on our side.”

“Why would you do that?”

If Wentworth knew the whole story, then he had every reason to question my

intentions, just as Alan had. And yet... he simply fixed me with a strained smile, like a patient father tending to a wailing child. It was rare to see him emote at all, so I was honestly a bit taken aback.

Then he said, "I could never doubt the loyalty of a maiden who would sacrifice her modesty to protect her friends. Without your courage, someone could have been gravely wounded. Thank you for your service, Miss Kiara."

I was so touched, tears sprang to my eyes... *Wait a minute.*

"Um, Sir Wentworth? Could you maybe... erase my 'modesty' from your memory, if possible?" I asked, wiping the corners of my eyes, and he chuckled at me. Somehow, his tone of voice remained distinct from Reggie's soft, dulcet tones and Alan's open expressiveness.

"As you wish. Still, I must say... you are a most peculiar woman. One minute you're dashing around the battlefield like a war hero, and the next minute you're blushing over a little bare skin."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Well, I *am* still a girl, you know." *And old enough to marry, at that.*

"Yes, of course. Oh, but for the record, Wentworth is actually my surname. In this case, my proper title would be Sir Cain."

Wait, what? Everyone was always calling him Wentworth, so I hadn't realized it was his last name at all.

"When I was first sworn in, there was already a knight by the name of Cain. Thus, to differentiate the two of us, they decided they would call me Wentworth."

"Oh, I see!" *Makes sense.* Come to think of it, there were a lot of Alans in this world, too. This sort of thing was probably fairly common.

"Now then, Miss Kiara, let us make haste back to the castle. We may not be able to station guards in every corner, but it's still safer there than out here off the beaten path."

"I understand, of course, but... can I keep looking for a little while longer?"

"Looking for what?" asked Wentworth—er, Cain.

“For the spellcasters.”

If I wanted to keep everyone safe, then this was my only option. Even if I couldn't find them right this instant, I would keep looking for as many days as it took. In my mind, I whispered an apology to Reggie.

I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise.



In the weeks that followed, almost as if to prove my suspicions correct, monsters began to appear in greater numbers near the castle. Today found our soldiers traveling to a small forest an hour away in order to wipe out another swarm.

“Fire!”

Once Alan gave the order, the rows of archers behind him let their arrows fly. Incendiary arrows, to be precise. They carved a graceful arc through the air directly at the swarm of sky-jellyfish floating over a prairie a short distance away. There were ten of them in total; most of them swatted the arrows away with their long, translucent tentacles, but about a third of them took the hit and began to sink, sizzling as they went.

These monster battles were now taking place at a rate of two per week. Whenever a town or village reported sightings of dangerous creatures in the area, the margrave sent his men at once to resolve the problem.

I tore my gaze away from the battle at hand. While Alan was distracted, I spurred my horse through the forest; naturally, Cain was right behind me.

On that fateful night one month ago, when I told him I was looking for spellcasters, he asked me if doing so would protect the House of Évrard. When I nodded, he volunteered to assist me in my quest.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder: why had he convinced Alan I wasn't a threat? Didn't he think my claims about my past life were nonsense?

When I asked him outright, however, he replied, “My parents lost their lives in the previous war with Llewyne—all because of a single dirty trick. They were on their way to provide backup to the nation of Erendor, but the heavy rains

had caused a landslide, blocking the high road to Llewynne. But then Llewynian soldiers ambushed them, disguised as repair workers.”

His lips twisted in a pained smile.

“Because of their carelessness, innocent civilians and farmworkers were injured in the ensuing battle. That’s why I’ll never turn a blind eye to even the slightest chance of danger. As it stands, we’re experiencing a series of unprecedented setbacks. With that in mind, I think we’d have to be stupid to ignore your warnings.”

Evidently, Cain wasn’t eager for history to repeat itself. But his was not a blind faith; no, he had several concrete reasons to believe me. And so it was that I gladly accepted his offer of assistance.

As I reminisced on the events of that night, I guided my horse through the trees, all the while holding my pendant with one hand to send out ripple after ripple. This method had already proven successful more than once, and now that I was more comfortable with the sensation, I could check it without needing to stop the horse.

Unfortunately, our suspect continued to evade us as though they knew we were coming. Worse still, there were always large numbers of monsters within the vicinity when we arrived—certainly too many for Cain to fight off on his own. His theory was that the spellcaster could control the monsters somehow, and sure enough, we would always inevitably stumble across a village under attack by monsters as well as an empty hideout that showed signs of a spellcaster’s presence. That was the point at which he decided to report back to Lord and Lady Évrard and formally request permission for us to accompany the monster dispatch squad whenever they were sent out.

The plan was simple: while soldiers fought off the monsters, Cain and I would sneak around to apprehend the spellcaster. After all, if we could take down the spellcaster, perhaps we could put an end to the outbreaks once and for all. Naturally, the plan was approved, and as a result, I now had His Lordship’s blessing to hunt for spellcasters.

That said, however, I obviously couldn’t go telling them about my newfound radar powers. Any mention of magic, no matter how slight, would invite

suspicion that I, too, was a defective spellcaster... and I wasn't exactly looking to get myself hauled off to the dungeon.

Lady Évrard was deeply concerned about my involvement in this plan. Fortunately, Alan hadn't revealed my secrets to his parents just yet; apparently, he had decided to think it through a little more. Every now and then I'd catch him assessing me with a probing stare, but unfortunately he had stopped speaking to me almost entirely, and it stung.

Still, if I was going to clear my name, the fastest route was to make myself into a spellcaster. Nothing else could possibly convince Alan that I wasn't crazy... except for the worst-case scenario, that is, and I refused to let it come to that. Hence, I was desperate to track down this spellcaster as soon as possible.

"They're close!" I told Cain.

He hopped off his horse and gestured for me to do the same. Then we tied our horses to a tree and crept forward as quietly as possible. He carried the cast net, while I carried the two flasks.

Once we'd taken about thirty steps, we spotted an old man sitting on a fallen log, facing away from us. He wore an ankle-length, sandy-brown poncho, reminiscent of a hermit's garb, beneath a dark, gray-black cloak (probably for night camouflage). A staff lay propped up against the log beside him—more specifically, a wooden walking stick with a T-shaped handle. In the distance ahead of him was a clear view of the ensuing battle between the soldiers and the sky-jellyfish.

Internally, I did a fist pump. This was, without a doubt, the spellcaster we'd been hunting for the past month. We'd caught a few glimpses of him here and there before now, but each time he'd sent his monsters to attack us while he escaped.

Fortunately, there were no monsters around this time. He probably figured he was safe over here, away from the fighting. And even better, he had yet to notice us, possibly because he was focused on controlling the monsters with his magic.

Cain and I exchanged a nod. Then, a few seconds later, he flung the net at our

quarry.

“Nngah!”

Though the net was intended for river fishing, it was still large enough to cover a human. Before the spellcaster could use his magic to break through, I walked up and hit him with the contents of the larger flask.

“Brrrr!” he shrieked, but I ignored him. Instead, I uncorked the smaller flask, reached in, and flung its contents at him: a leafy, bulbous creature happily flailing its roots. Yes, it was a zapgrass, and after being confined in darkness for so long, it sparked excitedly at the sight of sunlight.

Then it connected with the spellcaster.

“GAAAAHHH!”

Now that his body was soaking wet, it was the perfect conduit for the zapgrass’s electricity. One scream later, he collapsed, unconscious.

Considering I couldn’t use magic myself, this was the only offensive strategy I had been able to come up with. Even then, my intention was only to paralyze him. Surely the attack wasn’t strong enough to be fatal... right?

“He’s not dead, is he?” I asked.

Cain frowned, concerned. Then he grabbed the equally unconscious zapgrass and flung it far into the distance. Next, he made sure the man was still breathing, then tied him up.

Once it was safe, I had Cain use his sword to nudge the old man awake once more. I wasn’t sure how to greet him, so I said, “Good morning, Mr. Spellcaster! Rise and shine!”

Sure enough, the spellcaster stirred to life.

“Who the hell are you people?!”

“Your captors,” I told him truthfully.

“That’s one way to put it, I guess,” Cain muttered.

Meanwhile, the old man seemed to recognize us.

“Hmph! You’re the little weasels who’ve been stalking me! Yes, I remember.

When did I see you last? Three days ago? Heehee!” The withered old man let out an eerie cackle. “What do you want with this old dotard? Hoping to stop the monsters? Heeheehee!”

“That’s part of it, yes. But also I’d like to know how I can become a spellcaster, too. Could you tell me?” I asked.

For a split second, the man’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oho! So you’d like to throw your young life away? Heehee!”

What?! Are you saying the mere act of trying will kill me?!

He seemed to sense my panic, because his lips curled in a mischievous grin. “Not many have the constitution for magic. It all depends on whether you can stomach the contract stone. Eeeheehee! Even with a mentor to guide you, chances are, you’ll still end up a pile of dust. No sense in a young thing like you taking that gamble. That’s why all the spellcasters you meet are folks who don’t have anything left to lose! Mmheehee!”

“What’s a contract stone?”

I didn’t like his weird giggling, and it kind of felt like he was underestimating me, but at least he was willing to answer my questions. Had he resigned to his fate as my captive? I wasn’t sure, but either way, I appreciated it.

“The contract stone is imbued with the power of Creation. Assimilate it into your body, and you’ll gain the power to control Nature itself! Heehee!”

“Wow.” So that’s how magic works in this world.

In the RPG, magic spells were just listed out as text in a drop-down menu—pick one, use it, done. Of course, there were restrictions on what spells you could use at the start of the game, and the more you used them, the stronger they’d get. Plus, as each character leveled up, their spell range would increase.

“Ingesting that lump of raw energy is akin to swallowing the sun itself. Only those who can endure it will live to be spellcasters. But even then, no one can manage it alone... Pffheehee... That’s why each spellcaster has to split their stone with their mentor... Eeehee... Eeeheehee... Ghhck!”

The old man cackled so hard, he fell into a coughing fit. Meanwhile, I

contemplated this information. “How would they split a stone? Break it in half?”

“Precisely! The mentor takes the smaller piece, and the disciple takes the larger. They ingest it at the same time, and because the halves are connected, the mentor can help take some of the heat off of the disciple. Heeheehee! After all, the mentor is always a veteran spellcaster who went through the same process himself. He’ll already have a big chunk inside him, so another tiny piece won’t hurt much! Pffheehee!”

In other words, if the mentor was already on fire, then another ounce of kindling wouldn’t change anything. But for the disciple, setting oneself ablaze would look like a Herculean undertaking—one that came with the risk of first-degree burns. Thus, the mentor’s built-up tolerance could serve as a partial shield to mitigate the damage done to the disciple.

Now I understood why spellcasters all had mentors. In which case, there was only one question left to ask.

“Could I ask you to be my mentor?”

“Pffhee...?” Evidently, he hadn’t expected me to ask him flat-out. He blinked up at me from the ground.

“Miss Kiara! Are you out of your mind? You can’t trust this man!” Cain shouted. He was right, of course, but I was out of time. I needed to make myself a spellcaster ASAP, and this old man was my only hope.

“He’s right, you know,” the man grinned. “You should quit while you’re ahead. The mentor-disciple connection is binding... It will chain you to me. Eeeheehee.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. Through the contract stone, the mentor can control the disciple’s magic in order to keep them alive... but that means they can just as easily overload the disciple’s body and kill them. Are you sure you want to place your life in my hands? Eeeheehee!”

It seemed no spellcaster was truly independent. While I hadn’t anticipated this, in a way, it made a lot of sense. Since Game-Kiara was a spellcaster, she’d probably had a mentor, too. Maybe the reason she didn’t run from her final

battle was because her mentor forced her to stay and fight, lest they kill her outright. No matter what she did, she knew she would end up dead, so she chose to stand her ground.

“Now I get it...”

“If you don’t want anyone dictating how you live your life, then you can just forget about being a spellcaster! Eeeheeheehee!”

“Can they control the magic I use, too?”

“Oh, I imagine so. Pffheehee. There was once a spellcaster who plotted to destroy a building while his mentor was inside, but he was blocked from doing so, or so the story goes. Eeeheeheehee! What a fool.”

I fell silent. My journey to becoming a spellcaster was starting to look an awful lot like a waste of time... but this old man was the only spellcaster I knew other than the Thorn Princess. And since she wasn’t exactly forthcoming with information herself, I had a feeling she wouldn’t be eager to take me in as her disciple.

And another thing: Reggie had said she seemed unable to discuss the subject. Could that be yet another case of a mentor placing restrictions on their disciple? If so, maybe she literally *couldn’t* accept me as her disciple. Were there any other options?

Just then, Cain made a terrifying suggestion.

“What if I waited until after you safely survived the spellcaster transformation, then killed him?”

“Sir Cain! He’s not going to help me if he thinks you’re just going to kill him afterward!”

It was such a cold-blooded idea, I shot it down without a second thought.

“Never underestimate a spellcaster. I would put my life on the line to destroy you both,” the old man declared, and for once his expression was hard. Clearly he was serious.

As for me, all I knew was this: I had well and truly hit a dead end. It felt like a door had been slammed in my face.

Just then...

“Look out!”

Cain lunged forward and pushed me to the side. A split second later, a translucent tentacle shot out in front of my face. *A sky-jellyfish!* Their sting was far, far worse than any sea jelly. Together, the two of us stumbled away from the old spellcaster.

Meanwhile, a small number of men appeared—travelers, by the look of it, their faces concealed with cloth. They hauled up the old spellcaster and beat a hasty retreat. Considering the overall rarity of spellcasters in general, he was clearly worth rescuing.

As the men carried him away, the spellcaster gazed at me, his eyes almost... searching for something.

Meanwhile, Cain immediately changed tack, chasing after the men and crossing blades with one of them. Without sparing even a glance at the spellcaster, he launched a heavy offensive on the single straggler until he was defeated. A spray of blood shot out from his right arm, and his sword fell to the ground. Then Cain knocked him upside the head with the flat of his blade, knocking him unconscious on the spot.

It was an intense display of skill, if a bit frightening.

“Now we should be able to track the enemy’s movements,” he explained.

Ah, so that’s why he wanted to take one of them down. Smart thinking.

“Thank you. This should make finding the spellcaster a lot easier next time... right?” I hesitated because it occurred to me that I had no way of knowing for sure whether that old man was even willing to help me.

“If we threaten him a bit harder, he might tell us if there are any alternative methods. Don’t lose heart just yet,” Cain reassured me.

I nodded.

We decided we would call it a day and take our detainee back to the castle.

When we arrived, we were startled to find the whole castle in a flurry, the servants running from the estate to the barracks and back in a constant stream.

Fortunately, one of the passing guards noticed our confusion and stopped to enlighten us.

“Sir Knight! Miss Attendant! We’ve received word that His Highness the prince will arrive no later than tomorrow—or as early as today!”

“What?”

“Supposedly, Salekhard has requested to negotiate with him regarding an urgent crisis. I imagine you’ll hear all about it from His Lordship, so you’d better get going. He’s been looking for you two!”

At this, the blood drained from my face, and a wave of dizziness set in. The guard’s smile faltered. “Are you alright, miss?!”

“Miss Kiara!”

If Cain hadn’t flung our detainee to the ground in order to catch me, I probably would have passed out on the spot.

Reggie was on his way here... and now I was too late to acquire the means to save him.

Chapter 4: The Toll of Fate's Bell

Reggie arrived at the castle that very night. His welcoming party consisted of Lord Évrard, Lady Évrard (who had now recovered enough to walk, since her original injury wasn't too severe), Alan, his knight-guards, and the margravine's attendants, myself included.

When he rode up on horseback beneath the twilight, he was accompanied by a troop of more than twenty knights. They all dismounted in unison, with Reggie the last to touch down on solid ground. As the soldiers guided the horses into the stables, Reggie turned to Lord Évrard.

"Long time no see, Margrave. I hope you'll forgive me for my intrusion on such short notice; I sent word as fast as I could, but things have been rather hectic on my end."

He wore an inconspicuous hooded black cloak. A hint of silver hair spilled out from beneath, its color dyed copper beneath the light of the torches. Meanwhile, I bit my lip and tried not to cry.

I already knew why Reggie was here, of course. His Lordship had told me that Salekhard had seen a dramatic spike in monster sightings, and the culprit was determined to be of Farzian origin. Hence, they contacted our royal family in order to request a resolution to the conflict. In response, the Farzian government informed them of a similar crisis in the province of Évrard and suggested the two countries work together to investigate further. And so it was decided that formal negotiations would be held with Reggie representing the nation of Farzia.

The circumstances and time frame were different, but other than those two things, it was exactly like the plot of the RPG. This made me fearful that Llewynian soldiers were already waiting in ambush, and yet the House of Évrard hadn't received any reports. With Reggie here, surely they'd attack us any minute now.

Suppressing the urge to panic, I listened as the captain of the royal guard,

Groul, made a series of requests on behalf of His Highness. They were a group of twenty-six in total, Reggie included, they planned to stay for two weeks, and they wished to use Évrard Castle as the venue for the negotiations with Salekhard.

Wait, what? HERE?!

As I stared around in shock, my eyes met Reggie's. He grinned at me as if to say "Weren't expecting that, were you?" to which I very nearly nodded.

Why? Whatever for? I was dying to ask, but as I was merely an attendant, to do so would be speaking out of turn.

If we were holding the negotiations here, then we'd need to open the gates to welcome the envoy from Salekhard. Would Llewynne choose that moment to strike? Or what if they impersonated Salekhardian officials in order to infiltrate the castle and attack from the inside? My anxiety swelled, and I desperately wished our detainee would wake so we could interrogate him about the location of the Llewynian army.

Restless, I followed Lady Évrard back into the castle. On the way to my quarters, she told me I could take the entire day off tomorrow; evidently, she had heard about my scuffle with the spellcaster and wanted to make sure I got some rest. Depending on what the detainee had to say for himself, it was possible they'd ask me to take a break from my attendant work in order to focus entirely on hunting the spellcaster.

I gratefully accepted her request. Right as I was on my way to visit the dungeon, however, Cain stopped me just outside.

"I wouldn't if I were you. This sort of thing isn't fit for a lady's eyes," he explained vaguely, and at first I didn't understand what he meant. Then he continued, "If it were *just* an interrogation, I wouldn't stop you, but... well..." At last, I realized what he was getting at.

The captive was awake, and the interrogation had started... but it probably wasn't going well, which meant they might have to resort to some "enhanced" techniques. That was the part he didn't want me to see.

Frankly, with my past-life sensibilities, the mere *suggestion* of it being more

than an interrogation was utterly terrifying. Part of me wanted to stop them, but at the same time, I knew it was a necessary sacrifice if I wanted to protect the lives of everyone in the castle. Instead, all I could do was keep my distance.

But while I had the privilege of putting my head in the sand, I was essentially forcing Cain and the others to do my dirty work, and that gnawed at my conscience.

“From what we can tell, the man’s employer has blackmailed him into silence, so the process is taking some time,” Cain explained, as if to allay my fears. “But I estimate I’ll have an update for you soon.”

“Very well.”

Nodding, I decided to return to my quarters. But just as I turned to go, Cain suddenly grabbed my hand. His grip wasn’t tight or restrictive; if anything, it felt as though he was simply reaching out in concern.

“You don’t have to bottle it all up inside, you know.”

Puzzled, I looked up at him... and found him gazing at me sorrowfully.

“You’ve only just come of age, and after all the hardship you’ve endured, I imagine you must’ve had to teach yourself to turn off your emotions at a moment’s notice. But you don’t have to feel guilty about your own discomfort.”

I stared at him in shock. It felt like he’d seen right through me... and on top of that, he was trying to comfort me. While I was grateful for his thoughtfulness, I was still too perplexed to respond. This silence seemed to encourage Cain to continue.

“Women are, by nature, intrinsically compassionate creatures. Is it not human to fear the act of murder? Likewise, as men, it is our duty to take on the most gruesome tasks. So by all means, let us protect your purity; we wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I could feel my face turning redder than a tomato. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine someone would reference my “purity”! And right to my face! I had half a mind to correct the record and tell him I really wasn’t worth protecting.

Ugh... I should've said thank you and left while I still had the chance! Why do all the guys in this world always drop these cheesy lines like it's nothing?! Well... maybe not ALL the guys. I guess there's Harris, the chef's apprentice—at least HE acts like a normal boy. Come to think of it, didn't Reggie make some cheesy remarks of his own a while back? But I remember there was this weird sexual tension in the air, so I couldn't really say anything... Gahhh!

Screaming internally, I put a hand over my face. Meanwhile, Cain seemed to intuit how I'd reacted to his statement. He chuckled quietly. "You don't know how to take a compliment, do you?"

I had no comeback to this. He was entirely correct. *Rrgh! Could you not grin at me and squeeze my hand?!* I was so mortified, I could scarcely remember how to breathe.

"Glad to see I've cheered you up," he commented.

"What?"

"It's not healthy to let yourself be consumed with regret or pain; it will adversely affect your decision-making skills. Now then, go get some sleep. We'll need you rested up for tomorrow."

Smiling, he relinquished his grip on my hand. I nodded and walked off.

So, uh... Was he just messing with me to knock me out of my funk? That's even more humiliating.

Cain was a handsome guy. I could imagine he probably enjoyed getting a rise out of all the girls. *Yeah, that's it. He does this with everyone.* I needed to tell myself that, or else I didn't know how I was going to face him tomorrow morning.

I was so distracted, in fact, that when I heard a knock at my door shortly after returning to my quarters, I answered it without thinking.

"Who is it—whoa!"

"No sense in asking 'who is it' with the door already open, don't you think?"

It was Reggie.

"And you gave an awful start, at that! Am I truly so frightening?"

“Oh, no, um... I just wasn’t expecting you, so...”

Meanwhile, he walked in like he owned the place and locked the door behind him. *This again?! And was that Groul I saw standing just outside?!*

“Reggie, we’re not children anymore. We can’t keep doing this,” I told him, pointing to the closed door. But Reggie didn’t bat an eyelash.

“I don’t see a problem with it, personally. Do you?”

“But, well... I mean, you’re a prince. What if rumors start to spread?”

If people found out he was hanging around in a servant’s quarters, wouldn’t that damage his social standing?

“Oh, I don’t care about soiling my reputation. Or are you concerned about yours? Will it cause trouble for you if people gossip about us?”

Truth be told, Reggie was so handsome, anyone would kill to be at the center of a scandal with him. Even I wasn’t altogether opposed to the prospect. But because he was such a catch, I knew he’d never go for a total nobody like me. Maybe that was why he felt perfectly comfortable barging into my room.

“Now then... Where were you?”

It was such an unexpected question, my brain struggled to process it. And Reggie seemed to interpret my silence as suspicious.

“Were you doing something you shouldn’t have been? Is that why you can’t tell me?”

“I... Um...”

Sorry, but I really can’t tell you! I know I almost just said “I could tell you about it if I wanted” purely out of spite, but no, I really can’t!

After all, I was going behind Reggie’s back to hunt down a spellcaster. And as soon as they finished interrogating his friend, I was going right back out there to find him again.

But the longer I stayed silent, the more terrifying Reggie’s smile became.

“I warned you that there would be consequences for bad behavior.”

You sound like a third-rate villain, Reggie!

Of course, I could make silent potshots at him all I wanted, but it didn't change the fact that deep down, I was totally panicking. Was the cat out of the bag?! Did he already know all about my "bad behavior," or was he just bluffing?!

Cold sweat trickled down my back. He took a step forward, and I nearly took a step back.

"If there's nothing weighing on your conscience, then why are you trying to bolt?"

I froze in place.

Taking me by the hand, he led me over to the sofa—a gift from the margravine "for my new attendant"—and sat me down right beside him. We were now a breath apart, and his hand was still clutching mine. In other words, there would be no escape from this interrogation.

Trembling internally, I braced myself as best I could to prevent myself from spilling the beans.

"First, let's start with this most recent incident. While I do appreciate you rescuing my aunt, I'm told you did so by... hiking up your skirt and acting as a decoy? Is that true?"

"I did not 'hike it up'! I merely repositioned it a bit higher so it wouldn't get in the way when I—argh!"

I clutched my head in frustration... or rather, I tried to, but then Reggie grabbed my other hand and... leaned in?!

"Well, considering it was a practical decision that helped keep you out of danger, I'm willing to let it slide."

"Y-You're not mad?"

"Not at you, no. I'll just take it out on Alan instead."

As his face drew closer, I reflexively leaned back against the sofa. *Must be nice to have such a perfectly symmetrical face*, I found myself thinking. Probably my brain resorting to escapism to keep me from hyperventilating.

What do you mean, you're going to take it out on Alan?! Why are you so upset

about it in the first place?!

“Look, Reggie, you’re not my father, so why do you even—eep!”

I let out a tiny shriek as he drew his lips close to my ear.

“No, but I *am* your main benefactor. After all, I’m the one who convinced the House of Évrard to take you in. Is it not only natural, then, that looking after you would be my responsibility? To me, that means I need to set you straight whenever you misbehave.”

“Nngh...”

I couldn’t argue with that. He had a valid point—Lord Évrard had only hired me to suit the whims of His Highness the Crown Prince of Farzia. At the end of the day, I was Reggie’s problem to handle.

“So tell me, where were you just now? I hear you’ve been spending a lot of time outside the castle with Wentworth as of late.”

Oh god, he knows! Clearly someone must have told him what I was up to. Why else would he come interrogate me at this hour?

“Of course, if you were only acting on orders from above, then you’re hardly to blame. But when I went to ask the margrave about it, he told me I’d be better off getting all the details straight from the horse’s mouth, so here I am.”

Way to throw me under the bus, Your Lordship!

“You already know, don’t you?” I asked hesitantly.

His expression clouded over right before my eyes, his face so close I could practically see his pores.

“You broke your promise with me, didn’t you? Oh, Kiara. There was never any need for you to panic! I’ve already changed the circumstances of the negotiation as much as humanly possible.”

“By switching venues to Évrard Castle, you mean?”

He nodded. “A member of the Salekhardian royal family will be attending this negotiation as their representative, which means they’ll be bringing some soldiers of their own for security purposes. Furthermore, I’ve sent word to our

two neighboring provinces and asked them to station some troops at the border. Told them the monster outbreak in Évrard was in danger of spreading to their land and let them know we might need to summon them for backup. Of course, their numbers won't be too impressive since they think they'll be fighting monsters, but at least this way we can have additional waves of troops if the need arises."

"You mean it?!" I beamed. With additional troops, perhaps we could keep the fighting out of the castle altogether!

"Nice to finally see you smiling again," he said with a grin.

He relinquished his grip on my hands, reached up, and stroked my cheek... the way one might caress a lover. My heart skipped a beat.

"But it seems my efforts weren't enough for you, were they?"

"That's not true, Reggie. I just don't want you to die! That's why I want to do everything in my power to—"

I wanted so badly for him to understand me, but before I could finish my sentence, Reggie wrapped both arms around my head and pulled me against his chest, muffling my words. Then I felt him lean in close to my ear again, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

"Just because the Thorn Princess hasn't warned you against it doesn't mean it's safe. There are no guarantees, Kiara. You could turn to dust."

I could understand why Reggie would be worried. After all, he didn't know about my past life, so for all he knew, there was no proof that I could succeed.

"If someone else wanted to risk their life over this, I would let them; it would be their choice to make. But with you, it's not that simple—that's why I made you promise not to! What must I do to keep you, Kiara? Is my only option to lock you up somewhere? No, I'm sure you'd find a way to escape. Truth be told, I'd love nothing more than to chain you to the wall... but I know that would make you despise me, and I can't have that."

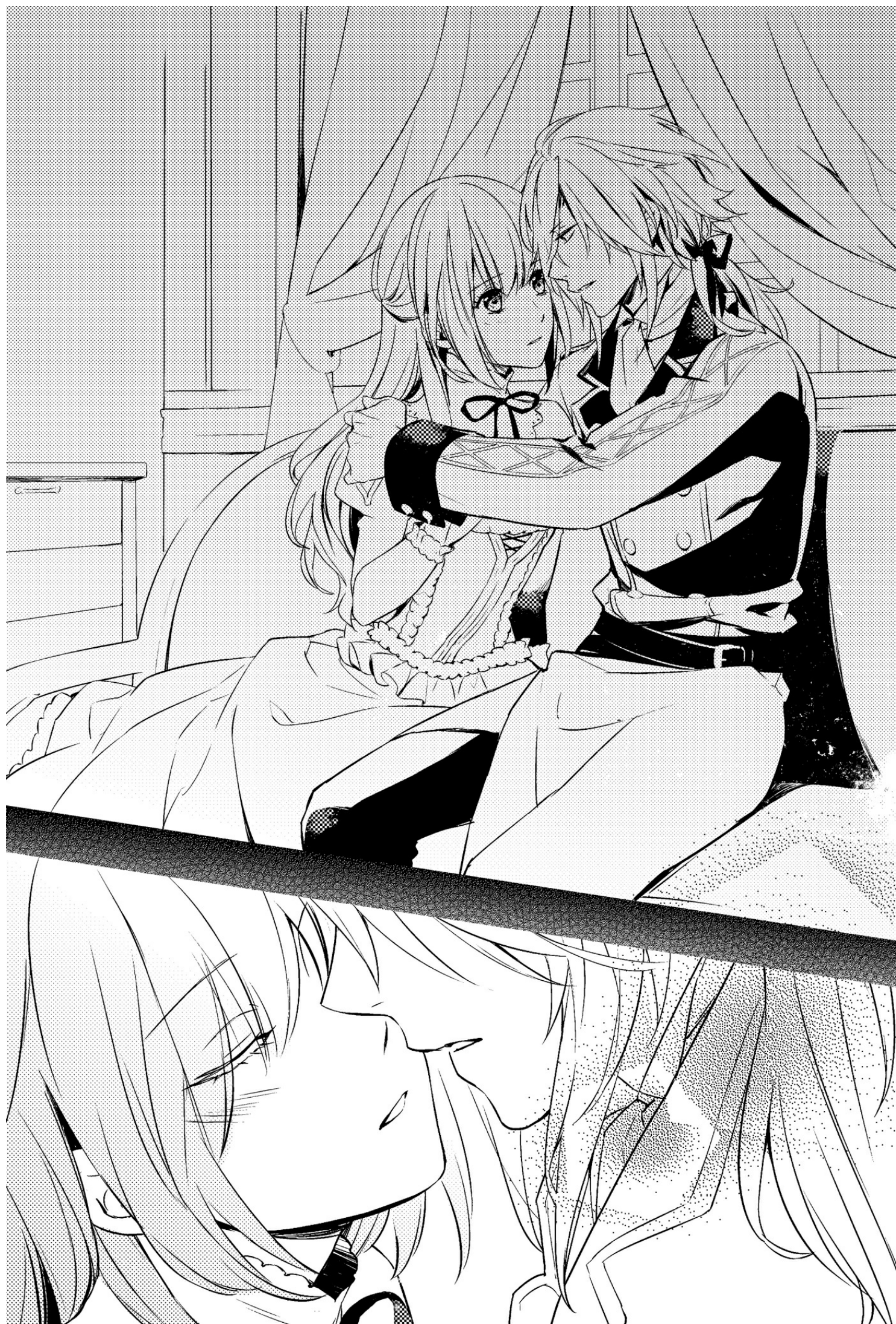
His sheer intensity overwhelmed me. By all accounts, his desire to imprison me should have been frightening, and yet I found I wasn't opposed to it. In fact, I was tempted to let his statement go unchallenged.

Never had I imagined that love would hurt this badly. My chest was tight, and I could scarcely breathe. If this was Reggie's preferred form of punishment, then it was highly effective.

Struggling to breathe, I tilted my head up... and my eyes met his. And when I registered the desperate yearning in his gaze, I realized he must have felt the same way I did. Could he see my yearning, too?

Each of us wanted nothing more than to keep the other alive and well... and to that end, we were willing to do whatever it took. We both wanted the same thing, but because of that, our opinions could never be reconciled. We knew this, and so we each turned a blind eye to the other's wishes.

Instead, all we could do was express the depth of our desires, and it was that passion that steadily pulled us together like magnets, inching closer and closer...



Just then, someone rapped loudly on the door; I could hear the alarm bells ringing. Snapping back to my senses, I jumped up and flung open the door. There stood Groul, looking as stern as ever. Apparently, His Lordship had asked for Reggie.

On his way out of my room, Reggie fixed me with one last, searching look, then hurried off down the hall. But just a few moments later, one of the middle-aged servant ladies arrived with a message for me.

“Haven’t you heard? The margravine’s been looking for you! You know, I’m surprised she lets a little waif like you go out to fight monsters. Are you hanging in there alright?”

This was the same woman who often gave me extra helpings at mealtimes out of concern that I wasn’t getting enough to eat. Her Ladyship must have asked her to fetch me in passing. While I was grateful for her concern, at the same time, it made me feel a little guilty.

At least now I had safely returned to reality. Just a few short minutes ago, why, it felt as though I were in a dream... That must be why I found myself wanting Reggie to hold me, among other things too fanciful to name. In fact, I was instantly mortified at the mere memory of it.

What on earth was I THINKING?! If Groul hadn’t knocked when he did, then we would’ve... we would’ve... KISSED or something? No, no, no, that can’t be right! Reggie’s a prince! Sure, we understand each other in a way few other people can, but that’s all there is to it! He was just concerned about me and didn’t know how to express it. Yes, that must be it!

After all, I was at an awful loss for words myself back there. Somehow, I couldn’t find the means to reassure him that I was going to be just fine. Then one thing led to another, and we both sort of just... went along with it.

Still, the kindly servant woman had given me an important reminder: right now, I had more to protect than just Reggie. His Lordship, and Alan, and all the fellow servants I’d befriended... I wanted them all to survive!

Thank you for bringing me back to my senses, ma’am!

And with that, I ran off to the meeting room on the second floor of the main

tower—the war room.

When I arrived, only a small number of people were inside: Lord and Lady Évrard, Alan, Cain, the cavalry commander, the captain of the guard, plus Reggie and Groul. As Her Ladyship's attendant, I took my place standing directly behind her. Fortunately, Maya and Clara were there, too, or else I *really* would have felt out of place.

Once the margrave started the discussion, however, my feelings of self-consciousness quickly went right out the window. Apparently our detainee had confessed that the Llewynian army was already fast approaching our border... from the north.

“The *north*?!”

This was completely unexpected. Apparently, the old spellcaster had been tasked with distracting the margrave's troops. But if Llewyrne was advancing from the north, that would mean they would've had to pass through Salekhard... the same country that was supposed to be sending a representative to take part in the negotiations.

“Do you suppose Salekhard has betrayed us?” Reggie mused as he sat at the head of the long table.

“It appears our captive wasn't given that sort of information,” Lord Évrard replied, sitting directly to His Highness's right. “He was simply ordered to join the siege once the army arrived.”

“So it's possible we'll be fighting monsters and spellcasters in addition to foot soldiers?” Alan asked.

“Precisely,” his father nodded.

I bit my lip. If only I hadn't let that old man escape, we wouldn't have had to worry about this.

“What are their numbers?” asked Lady Évrard.

“He didn't have that information either—they must have predicted that someone on his team might get captured—but if they were going to sneak a large number of men across our border, passing through Salekhard would be

the way to do it. We should prepare for the worst,” His Lordship replied.

The lack of concrete information had everyone in the room on edge.

“For now, provided the intel we have is accurate, let’s talk countermeasures,” Reggie suggested. And so Lord Évrard detailed his strategy in full:

First, assuming the enemy was going to approach from two different directions, Llewyn would probably have a separate unit act as a decoy to buy even more time for the main troops to arrive. His Lordship anticipated no fewer than three separate skirmishes to break out.

Meanwhile, I groaned internally. In the RPG, there was only one battle, and it took place right at the castle—probably because the House of Évrard had no advance warning. Here in real life, however, things were different.

As Farzia’s primary line of defense, the province of Évrard always had a reasonable amount of soldiers on standby at any given time, but... would it be enough to stop a full-scale invasion?

In the RPG, the siege at Évrard Castle wasn’t a player-controlled battle, so I had no insight into the enemy’s unit positioning. All I could do was stand back and let the seasoned veterans lead the charge. But since His Lordship was already anticipating a sizable number of enemy troops, I trusted him to prepare accordingly.

“We’ll still need to leave some men stationed at the border, but with the brambles to the south and the mountains to the east, the enemy won’t be able to take a detour around our defensive walls. So, we’ll leave three hundred where they are and add the other three hundred to our main force.”

All told, we would have a thousand men gathered at the castle by tomorrow morning. The other seven hundred were soldiers from around the castle and the surrounding areas; the numbers were higher than usual due to all the monster combat in recent weeks. And if we borrowed troops from the closest branch estate, we could ultimately swell our ranks to 3,300.

This number didn’t include any soldiers drafted from the local villages—that would take time. If we sent a messenger right this moment, then gave two days for recruiting time, His Lordship predicted that we could gather approximately

6,000 more. With three days, we could have a full 10,000 soldiers in total.

But these numbers were only possible because this sort of conflict was common within Évrard. The farmers who lived in these parts knew to keep a sword and shield handy for whenever their homeland came under attack.

But if our captive's word was to be believed, then Llewyrne had surely already crossed the border into Farzia by now... because they had timed their arrival based on Reggie's.

"Llewyrne's goal is to kill Prince Reginald here, as he is the heir to the throne. Then they'll march to the royal capital, and if they can slay the king, the sovereignty of our nation will fall upon the queen. Llewyrne will demand annexation, Her Majesty will accept, and Farzia as we know it will be gone. Thus, I believe they waited until His Highness had arrived for the negotiations with Salekhard in order to strike. They wanted him to get as close to the border as possible."

And to that end, they had intentionally caused conflict between Salekhard and the province of Évrard. With so many noble houses presently allied with the queen, it would be impossible to keep Reggie's movements from being leaked to Llewyrne, especially since he was a public figure. No matter where he went, they were bound to find out about it.

"As soon as my scout returns, I shall lead my troops out onto the battlefield," His Lordship declared. "I estimate we'll depart either tomorrow or the morning after."

Lady Évrard's expression darkened slightly. "You're going into battle?"

"We'll be right there with him, Your Ladyship. I promise we'll have him back home in one piece once it's all over," the cavalry commander pledged.

The margravine nodded, though the uncertainty hadn't left her eyes. "My leg is almost fully healed now. I wish I could nominate myself to go in your stead, but when it comes to large-scale battles, I'm afraid I'm far too inexperienced; I simply won't be of much use out there. Instead, you can trust me to protect His Highness and the castle."

Indeed, Her Ladyship had made a full recovery. And with her taking part in the

battle, we were in a much more advantageous position compared to the RPG. Plus, if Lord Évrard's troops managed to strike first, we might just gain the upper hand in this defensive battle—His Lordship said as much himself.

“Llewyne can't afford to send one hundred percent of their forces to our castle. The more time they spend invading us, the more time they'll give the other provinces to bolster their defenses. If they can't invade completely on the first try, I imagine they'll either leave some soldiers behind to deal with it while they move on, or they'll devise some underhanded tactic.”

“Such as?” asked Alan.

“Well, they have at least one spellcaster, don't they? I suspect they'll use him for more than just monster manipulation. They'll probably have him attack directly.”

Alan's expression turned sour. “Then I shall handle him.”

Lord Évrard's eyes widened. “I was planning to ask you to stay with Beatrice to protect the castle, or in the event of the worst-case scenario, evacuate His Highness to safety.”

“I've been taking part in monster dispatch missions all month long—I can handle it. I'll take the spellcaster trackers with me and hunt him down before he can attack the castle. But I predict he'll have a horde of monsters with him, so I'd like to borrow some archers and infantry, if I may.”

The margrave closed his eyes and ruminated on his son's plan for a moment. And when he opened them, it was clear he had made up his mind. “Very well. How many will you require?”

“If past experience is anything to go by, we can expect about thirty monsters total, plus the spellcaster and his friends. As such, I imagine I won't need more than a hundred and thirty.”

Over the past month, Alan had paid close attention to the enemy numbers and repeating patterns between encounters. He had the observational skills of a competent tactician—unsurprising for the protagonist of a strategy RPG, of course.

As for the “spellcaster trackers,” he was referring to Cain and myself. In

previous dispatch missions, Cain had had to request permission for us to accompany the troops, but this time Alan *wanted* to take us with him. Part of me was thrilled that he was finally acknowledging my ability, but another part of me was kicking myself for not proving myself to him sooner. Either way, I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Mother, I'd like to borrow Kiara. She'll be safe with Wentworth."

At this, Lady Évrard probed me with an inquiring look. I nodded firmly.

"But she doesn't have any combat skills," Reggie pointed out bluntly. "And even if we sent up a signal flare right this moment, it'll still take two days for backup troops to arrive from our two allied houses in the southwest."

I knew Reggie was just looking out for my well-being, but now both His Lordship and the cavalry commander seemed reluctant to let me tag along. Hastily, I spoke up.

"We've already succeeded in capturing the spellcaster once before. Last time, we failed to anticipate that he would be rescued, but this time, we *will* bring him in."

My eyes met Reggie's. The hard look on his face seemed to say *Why can't you see things my way?* Unfortunately for him, however, my mind was already made up. I couldn't back down—not here. I was going to keep everyone safe.

I was terrified of getting myself killed, but if I didn't make a stand right now, I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life.

I hadn't expected spellcasters or monsters to be involved in the castle siege. Llewyne's invasion route was different, too. Even if we took every precaution, it was possible some enemy soldiers might slip through the cracks. But if I could just take down the old man and wipe out his monster horde... well, at least that way I could make myself useful. And maybe, just maybe, I could use these past-life memories to save some lives.



Each person was given a pack to carry. None of them were especially large, but as most people in the group already had luggage of their own to haul around, none of us were eager to take on even more. Reluctantly, we marched

out at the break of dawn.

“How is this little thing so heavy?”

“What’s in yours? Flour? Mine’s so lumpy, it might just scratch up my armor.”

“I think mine might have meat in it.”

The foot soldiers followed behind the cavalry, whispering to each other along the way. Not that I could really blame them, of course. Not only were they headed off to fight a spellcaster and his monster pets, but they were tasked with carrying a rather peculiar combination of items with an even *more* peculiar explanation as to why. But my strategy was a risky one, and without a concrete guarantee of success, I couldn’t hope to allay any of their anxiety.

I was riding with Cain on his horse, wearing men’s combat attire loaned to me by one of the young squires: tunic, trousers, and boots, uniformly dark in color. In my hand was the stone pendant.

“Keep going straight,” I muttered to Cain, who in turn passed the instructions on to the other knights.

We traveled for several hours until I could at last feel the spellcaster’s signal was close at hand. The only information I had was his general direction, which led us directly through a forest approaching the main high road. Fortunately, however, this meant we were able to sneak a peek at the enemy from atop a small cliff roughly twice the height of the average person.

“There he is.”

Word quietly traveled through our group, and once the soldiers located the enemy, they arranged themselves into battle formation.

The old spellcaster was guarded by five soldiers, with a horde of monsters waiting just ahead of them. But one thing in particular caught my attention: this time around, the horde was bigger than ever. Normally, the most we ever fought was thirty at a time, but today we were looking at around fifty—a combination of windwolves and sky-jellies. Clearly, thirty wasn’t the spellcaster’s maximum after all. Maybe he’d been going easy on us up until now.

I could easily see why they'd chosen to take the high road. Navigating this particular forest would have been a challenge with so many monsters to look after. In fact, some of them were already starting to attack each other. The spellcaster was doing his best to keep them under control, of course, but these wild animals weren't exactly fond of being controlled.

Eventually, the spellcaster reorganized the windwolves to the front of the procession, followed by the sky-jellies a short distance behind them, with himself and the other human soldiers taking up the rear.

Bingo.

I looked over my shoulder at Cain. One look at his face and I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was. Before we could turn the horse around, however...

"Kiara," Alan called quietly. "Take ten cavalry soldiers with you."

"What? But..."

If I took ten soldiers with me, that was ten fewer Alan would have for his own battle. The windwolves and sky-jellies could crest a cliff of this height with no trouble at all—and this time, there were more of them than ever before. Could he really afford to give up ten men?

"They're your best bet against human opponents."

"We should accept his kindness, Miss Kiara," Cain urged.

"Please do," Alan nodded. "Otherwise Reggie will tear me apart when we return."

On second thought, maybe he had a point. Reggie was already opposed to me going on this mission in the first place; if I came home injured, I could only imagine how furious he would be. Naturally, it was in both of our interests to avoid that scenario, and thus the smart thing would be to work together to prevent it.

As a compromise, I haggled him down to just five soldiers—one for each of the men guarding the spellcaster—and off we went, around the cliff and out to the high road.

Meanwhile, Alan prepared his troops to attack. A handful of people emptied the contents of their packs over the edge of the cliff, and then the archers fired a wave of arrows in perfect sync.

When the monsters spotted the arrows flying at them, they noticed Alan and his troops atop the cliff and took off—the windwolves running at full speed while the sky-jellies floated ominously in their direction. But the human soldiers couldn't very well leave the spellcaster to his own devices; we'd already captured him once before, and they were probably anticipating that we would try again. As such, we were forced to bide our time and wait for the perfect moment to strike.

We dismounted our horses a short distance away, concealed ourselves in a cluster of trees, and carefully observed the enemy.

The wolves had already reached the bottom of the cliff... but instead of climbing up, they stayed put and sniffed around. Why? Because they could smell the meat the soldiers had dumped over the edge of the cliff... and when given the choice between a battle and a free meal, they chose the meal.

Naturally, the ringleaders viewed this as a cause for concern.

"Hey! How come the wolves aren't attacking?" one of them demanded.

"Don't look at me! I'm doing my job!" the spellcaster shot back.

So far, so good.

I had a pet theory as to how the spellcaster was able to control the monsters. They were probably fed the same red potion as the defective spellcasters, establishing a mentor-disciple relationship that the mentor (in this case, the old man) could then use to his advantage.

But if so, why didn't they turn to dust like defectives? My best guess was that monsters were already similar in nature to spellcasters, since both could cast magic at will. Perhaps there was something about their constitution that prevented a fatal magic overload.

Regardless, it would be a challenge for the mentor to maintain control over a disciple that had only ingested the smallest shavings of a contract stone. Hence, I'd had a hunch that the spellcaster's commands probably wouldn't win out

over the beast's own physiological needs. And sure enough, the wolves had prioritized their hunger. They devoured the meat ravenously, swallowing large chunks without even pausing to chew. This suggested to me that their human masters hadn't seen fit to feed them.

Once the wolves had consumed a considerable amount of meat, Alan ordered another wave of arrows. The food had lowered the wolves' guard, and as a result, the attack took out several of them. However, this diverted their attention from the food.

To climb up the cliff, a few wolves summoned the wind and leapt up—only to sail right over Alan's soldiers altogether! Startled, the wolves flailed their limbs in midair. Ultimately they still managed to land on their feet, but they were so confused by what had happened that they failed to react before Alan's soldiers got to them... and so they were summarily slain.

"Looks like it worked," Cain whispered.

I nodded. "Better than I ever imagined, too."

My secret? I'd laced the meat with ore fragments.

To cast wind magic, spellcasters occasionally used flux ore as a conduit. This was knowledge I'd gained reading the previous margrave's journal—the one I'd found in the library.

You see, the spellcaster's monsters had one thing in common: both windwolves and sky-jellies used wind magic to get around. Because windwolves typically inhabited the areas near mines, where ore could be harvested, I deduced that they probably needed to gnaw on some ore every now and then to replenish their wind powers.

From there, it occurred to me: what would happen if they consumed too much without realizing? Wouldn't an overdose cause their magic to go berserk?

Still, there was no guarantee I was right. And in the event that my plan failed, we would've needed to retreat, regroup, and approach them again later. But no—my hypothesis was right on the money.

I smirked. Now that the windwolves were out of control, the spellcaster was urgently directing the sky-jellies in Alan's direction. Unfortunately for him,

however, we'd prepared a countermeasure for those, too: ore powder. It was the same flux ore but ground up even finer than the fragments. Fortunately, this particular ore crumbled easily, but nevertheless, it had taken ages to prepare.

Once the jellies were hit with the powder, they lost control of their ability to fly. Some began to float sky-high, while others descended until their tentacles dragged on the ground. With their excellent reach, these barbed tentacles normally made close combat with a sky-jelly nearly impossible, but now our archers were able to bring them down with barely any trouble at all.

Once the jellies hit the ground, they flailed their limbs in a desperate attempt to right themselves. It would take another flurry of arrows to deliver the finishing blow. But Alan was more focused on bringing down the ones that remained airborne. After all, we didn't need to kill the beasts—just render them powerless.

Now the old spellcaster was starting to panic.

"I-I'm getting out of here!"

"Hey!" One of the soldiers seized him before he could bolt. "That's not what we agreed on!"

"I'm not breaking our agreement! I'm just going to fetch some more monsters, and then I'll be right back! Heehee!"

"If you leave now, we won't make it in time to regroup with the main troops!"

"But the fact remains, we don't have enough pawns..."

The soldiers quickly found themselves divided into those who wanted to retreat and those who refused... and that's when we jumped in. By the time they noticed us approaching, it was too late—Cain had already struck one of them down with a single swing of his sword. The resulting spray of blood made me wince.

Gritting my teeth, I watched as the other knights took down the four remaining soldiers. It all happened so fast, the old spellcaster could scarcely process it. Then, after a moment, he chuckled.

“Heehee! Lucky me. Now I’m beholden to no one. Pffheeheehee!”

“What do you mean?” I asked, peering out from behind Cain.

The old man blinked at me. “Well, well! If it isn’t the little lady from last time! Pffheehee. Seeing as I’ve no reason to fight you any longer, I suppose I’ll answer your question. I took this job in exchange for the medication required to treat my chronic illness.”

He snatched a rucksack from under one of the fallen soldiers nearby.

“The medicine was all I ever cared about, so I’m done fighting you folks. Now all that’s left is to get far, far away from here! Farewell! Eeeheeheehee!”

Laughing, the man slowly floated into the air. *Wind magic.*

“Hold it! I don’t believe you for a second. If we let you go, you’ll just go attack our castle!” one of the knights shouted.

But the old man merely guffawed... until suddenly, his laughter was cut short. A stray arrow had lodged itself into his shoulder. This seemed to knock the power of levitation right out of him, and as he slowly descended back to the ground, a second arrow hit home.

“Wait, what?”

At first, I didn’t understand what had happened. Then a third arrow nearly pierced the man’s skull—but fortunately, Cain was able to block it with his sword.

Unfortunately, it was clear that the spellcaster was already fatally wounded.

In the distance, I could see someone—a lone figure—galloping away on their horse. Perhaps they were tasked with “supervising” the old man to ensure he couldn’t bail... by whatever means necessary. Even *he* seemed to suspect as much.

“Seems they’ve decided to silence me... Can’t believe I didn’t... see that coming... Heehee...”

Cain turned and sent the five other knights to pursue the assassin. Unsure what to do, I knelt beside the old spellcaster.

“A-Are you okay, sir?”

“Do I look okay to you, missy?” he shot back sarcastically. Then he chuckled. “I guess this is the end for me... What a shame. There was still... more I wanted to do...”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them once more—and looked at me.

“You said... you want to be a spellcaster, right? Are you sure you’ve... got what it takes?”

“Very sure. I know it for a fact.”

“Oh? And how do you know?”

“I’ve seen the future... or one possible future, at any rate,” I explained, now that the other knights were gone. “In it, the prince comes to negotiate with Salekhard, only for Llewyne to invade the country. And in that future, I’m a spellcaster who can control golems.”

I assumed he would laugh at me—tell me I was a silly girl mistaking my daydream for a prophecy. But he didn’t.

“Precognition and golems, eh? Heeheehee... That’s a fun combination... I like it.” He looked into the distance for a moment, then turned back to me and narrowed his eyes. “If you’ll try to grant my final wish, then... I’ll take you on as my disciple.”

Wait, really?! For a moment I wasn’t sure whether to take him at his word, but since he was already knocking on death’s door, he didn’t have much incentive to lie.

“What sort of ‘final wish’ are we talking about?”

“I want you to create a vessel and embed my soul into it... the same way one gives life to a golem. It’s possible you may fail, but even then... I was going to die anyway, y’know? It’s worth a try, I say. If all goes well, my soul will live on... and at this point, I’m desperate. So... if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. Plus, once I’m reduced to a spirit, I doubt I’ll be able to control your magic much... Heeheehee...”

Now I understood: perhaps he'd been devising this fallback ever since the last time we spoke. After all, we both stood to gain from this arrangement—he needed someone who could endure the contract process in order to keep him alive, and I didn't know any other spellcaster who would take me as their disciple. Plus, once his soul left his body, he would (hopefully) lose the ability to manipulate my magic.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. I was his only hope... and likewise, he was mine.

"You've got yourself a deal, mister. But I've never done this before, so I can't promise I'll succeed."

"Miss Kiara..." Cain began. But I shook my head.

"This is the only chance I'm going to get. And if it means I can accomplish my goals, then I'm not going to let it slip through my fingers."

"Heehee! This kid's got some backbone... I like it. Now give me the contract stone... That red stone you've got there."

As he spoke, he pointed at the necklace in my hand. Instantly, my previous suspicions were confirmed. When the Thorn Princess told me not to "attempt to use anything else," she must've been referring to the contract process. Perhaps she'd seen my future.

I freed the stone from the necklace chain. The old man was now too weak to lift his hand from the ground, so I placed it directly into his palm. He curled his fingers tightly around it until there was a loud *crack*... and when he opened his fist, approximately one-tenth of the stone had broken off.

"Normally, the disciple-mentor ratio is more like seven to three, but... this is about the best you can expect from an old geezer on his deathbed. You'll have to manage the rest on your own. Now... once I swallow my piece, you'll need to swallow yours quick."

I nodded and took the two stone fragments from his palm. My fingers were trembling. Nevertheless, I pushed the smaller piece into his mouth and watched him swallow.

Then, summoning all of my resolve, I popped the rest of the stone into my

own mouth. It went down a lot more easily than I was expecting—almost like it had melted into liquid.

Then I felt something spread from my esophagus... to my lungs... to my heart... traveling through my blood vessels to my internal organs.

“Ggghh!”

Pain seared through me as though I’d ingested burning-hot lava. It felt like someone had stabbed a needle into every single cell in my body. I could tell that I was screaming and rolling around on the ground, but somehow I felt detached from it all.

The pain and heat seeped into every corner of my body, and I could only pray that it would end soon, though I didn’t know when. In the back of my mind, I registered the sickening feeling of my body melting into fluid, then reconstructing itself once more. Maybe that was what caused defectives to turn to dust—because their bodies couldn’t reconstruct properly. Perhaps this was the same pain they felt right before they died. That would certainly explain why so many of them spiraled out of control.

Every now and then, I could feel my body hit a snag as it attempted to rebuild itself—only for the decomposition process to be halted, almost as if by an invisible guiding hand, while my body recharged its energy for more reconstruction. Evidently, this was what the old spellcaster meant by the mentor helping to control the process for the disciple.

Then I felt my overheated body start to sweat... and that was when I snapped to my senses.

“Miss Kiara?! Miss Kiara!”

I found myself cradled in Cain’s arms. As I blinked up at him, the terror faded from his face, replaced by relief. Apparently he’d been rather concerned about me. *Sorry to frighten you, Sir Cain.*

“Are you alright?”

“I’m okay. I’m alive... I think.”

I looked down at my body and wiggled my fingers to make sure. I didn’t see

any sand or missing limbs, but my body still felt faintly numb, like it wasn't my own... Almost like I had physically transformed. The thought made me shudder.

As far as I knew, I was now officially a spellcaster. Did spellcasters still count as human? Or were they something else entirely...?

Either way, it was a bit too late to start worrying about it at this stage. Once I regained my mobility, I thanked Cain and sat upright. Now that my body was feeling normal again, my fear was steadily fading.

The old man was lying next to me. His breathing had grown faint, like it might stop at any moment.

"Looks like you were right, kid... You really did have it in you," he whispered with a hoarse chuckle.

I nodded. "Now, how do I cast magic?"

It was time for me to hold up my end of the bargain.

"You said you have the power to... create golems, right? Then put your hand to the ground and... envision it. Search the earth for... the same power that resides within you... Gather it... Then sculpt it."

His eyes were empty, unseeing, and his speech had slowed considerably. He'd probably spent the last of his strength on our contract.

Following his instructions, I pressed a hand to the earth. Then it hit me: how was I supposed to summon his soul into a new vessel if I didn't even know who he was?

"While I'm at it, might I ask what my new mentor's name is?"

"Horace," he whispered. And with that, he fell still.

A moment later, his body began to crumble into dust, starting from one end and working its way up. Evidently it wasn't just the defectives who died in this manner.

"Miss Kiara, the spellcaster...!"

"I know. I'll make this quick."

Closing my eyes, I began to search the earth for the same magic power I

sensed within myself.

“If you think about it... you don’t really need to follow through on your promise,” Cain pointed out.

Truth be told, he wasn’t wrong. It was certainly an option... but not for me.

“This man used the last of his strength to help me. I’d rather keep my word if I’m able.”

With his assistance, I had now gained the power to protect the people I cared about, and that was a debt I wished to repay.

Not only was I a total beginner, but the only person who could have walked me through this was presently deceased. Focusing hard, I repeated Horace’s instructions in my head, and after a lot of trial and error, I figured out how to detect the heat signature that matched my own.

Now to sculpt it. Wait, what are golems supposed to look like?

My first thought was the giant golems that appeared in the RPG, but I couldn’t put the old man’s soul in something so large. Were there any smaller alternatives? The only thing I could think of would be a Lego model. But I wanted something between those two extremes—something I could carry in my arms. *Oh, and something with eyes and a mouth, of course, so we can talk!*

In the end, what I came up with was a bug-eyed statue reminiscent of a prehistoric Japanese clay figurine. But looking back, Horace was pretty bug-eyed as a human, so perhaps it was fitting... *No, no! I can’t stick him in this ugly thing!*

The instant I started having second thoughts, my concentration was shattered.

“Ugh...”

When I opened my eyes, it was too late.

Before me was a little clay statue, no more than thirty cers tall—the perfect size to carry. Only half of Horace’s body remained intact. There was no going back now. It was time to complete the transplant.

Concentrating hard, I willed Horace’s soul to come to me. Tiny red fragments

floated up out of his body and into the new vessel... and a moment later, the statue's goggly eyes lit up.

"Oho! So this is my new body, eh?" asked an echoey voice, like someone was talking directly into a vase. Unsurprisingly, it was Horace's voice. Meanwhile, his body was now almost completely dust.

Looks like I succeeded. Should I be proud, or...?

I glanced over at Cain to find his face frozen in a half-smile, half-grimace.

Yeah, I feel you.

Horace, on the other hand, seemed quite pleased. He flexed his new arms and legs.

Wait, it IS him, right?

"Um... Master Horace?"

Now that he was officially my mentor, I figured I may as well show the proper deference.

"Master, you say? Pffheeheehee!"

His coppery clay body shook with bashful glee—and considering his alien appearance, it was a downright eerie sight. But judging from his signature cackle, there was no doubt in my mind: this was him.

Apparently, his shoulders, neck, hips, and knees were all flexible, like an action figure. This was not something I had consciously included in the creation process.

"How long will this spell last? Admittedly, I'm new to magic, but it seems to me this new body of yours can't last forever."

"Heeheehee! To think an old geezer like me popped your—"

At this, Cain clapped his hands over my ears; evidently he felt this sort of bawdy humor was ill-fit for a young lady to hear. Personally, I felt I was going to have to learn about the birds and the bees sooner or later. Plus, I'd heard a lot worse from the teenage boys back in my past life.

But before I could protest, it occurred to me: I was going to have to take this

little statue with me, right? Which meant... he could potentially blab everything to Reggie, Alan, or even Lord and Lady Évrard?!

Summoning my resolve, I reached out and sentenced my perverted statue to an unceremonious flick to the forehead.

“Oof! That... didn’t hurt, actually, but I sure felt it!”

“It didn’t? Dang. Well, fortunately for you, *I’m* willing to let it slide, but next time you might not be so lucky! Keep your inappropriate comments to yourself, or else someone less considerate than myself might just crush you underfoot!”

“Tsk... You’re no fun. I was hoping I’d at least get a blush out of you.” He shook his little clay head in disappointment. “Now, as for your earlier question: my body will last for as long as your mana can support it. For a normal golem, this is no problem, of course—the ‘life’ you breathe into them is purely artificial. But this is *my* body we’re talking about, so it’s a bit of a different story. Eh, I imagine I could last about three days without any fresh mana.”

In other words, pretty similar to a battery-powered toy—once it ran out, it would stop moving.

“Long story short, in order to keep my soul in this vessel, I’ll need to stick close to you.”

“Right. I had a feeling you might.”

“Wh-What?! You’re taking him with you?!” Cain sputtered, breaking his long silence at last. I couldn’t blame him for struggling to process what he was looking at; not only had I manifested a hideous, bug-eyed clay figurine out of nowhere, but then it started talking.

“He helped turn me into a spellcaster, so I have every intention of... keeping him alive, I guess? Is that a strange way to put it? Besides, if I left him here, I can only imagine the rumors that would start floating around. A bug-eyed statue, screaming my name as it crumbles to dust...”

That was something I dearly wanted to avoid. If I survived the war only to end up with a less-than-desirable reputation, I’d never be able to show my face at Évrard Castle ever again. I could *not* let that happen.

“Right... Makes sense,” Cain nodded, grimacing.

A short while later, the five knights returned to report that they had unfortunately lost sight of the assassin who shot Horace.

“Not to worry. Now that we’ve captured Master Horace’s soul, I’m sure we can get plenty of information out of him.”

“*Captured?* I’m not sure I like the way you phrased that, little lady. Then again, considering you wanted *me* as your mentor, I should’ve known you’d be a troublemaker! Eeeheehee!”

My intention was to console the crestfallen knights, but now that my statue was talking, they all looked mildly terrified.

“Did that...?”

“Hold on—everyone else heard that, right? I’m not crazy?”

“It can *talk*?!”

I didn’t expect them to understand, so I moved on to my next order of business.

We took Master’s remains and buried them in the forest beside the high road. I no longer had any need for a shovel; instead, all I needed to do was *imagine* the hole I wanted, then convey my wishes to the mana in the soil. Naturally, the knights were stunned to see me using magic, so Cain explained everything to them while I worked.

Once his remains were buried, I put Master’s important belongings into his rucksack and slung it over my shoulder. We had solved the monster problem, and now it was time to return to the castle posthaste.

With Master Horace tucked safely under my arm, I climbed back onto Cain’s horse with him. He still seemed to have some misgivings; likewise, the other knights all shot me confused glances as they mounted their own steeds. *Oh well. I’m sure they’ll adjust to it eventually, right?*

When we arrived back at the top of the cliff, we found that the surviving monsters had lost interest in fighting and had all gone their separate ways, probably because Horace’s magical connection to them had been severed.

“Alan!”

I waved at him, and he trotted over on his horse.

“Kiara, I saw you pass out down there! What ha—aaaAAAAHHH! The hell is that thing?!”

Right as he reached out to touch my arm, he caught sight of the hideous clay figurine tucked under it and whipped his hand back. I briefly debated how to respond, but ultimately decided I’d probably need to introduce them.

“This is Horace, my new spellcasting mentor.” I held him up and made him do a little bow.

“Listen here, little disciple. I’m not your toy, got that?”

“Of course. That’s why I bothered to introduce you in the first place.”

“It can talk?!”

Perplexed, Alan shot a “help me” look at Cain behind me, but Cain merely shook his head. So Alan turned to the other knights... but they had already caught on, and so they, too, shook their heads.

“Apologies, milord, but... I’m afraid these spellcasters are beyond our understanding,” said one.

“Which is probably why Miss Kiara is such a perfect fit, what with her... *unconventional* way of thinking,” said another.

Alan looked back at me, his eyes wide. “You’re a spellcaster now?”

Evidently, he hadn’t been able to tell what we were doing from such a great distance. I nodded. All at once, his expression lit up with equal parts relief and concern.

“I see... So you were right,” he muttered. Then he hopped off his horse. Hastily, one of his knights followed suit in order to take the reins.

Meanwhile, Alan walked right up to us. For a moment, he stared down at the ground... and then he knelt down before me.

“What are you doing?!” I yelped.

“What needs to be done,” he answered quietly. “I owe you an apology.”

He looked up at me, his eyes full of guilt, and gestured for me to dismount. At his request, I turned and handed Horace to Cain before sliding down to the ground. Cain let out an audible groan of disgust, but took him nonetheless.

“Apology for what, Alan? Surely you don’t mean—”

“I called you a liar, Kiara.”

Sure enough, he was referring to that fateful day more than a month ago—the day I screamed at Alan about my past life. At the time, he hadn’t believed a word I said, but then Cain came along and convinced him to give me a chance. Then, just yesterday, it came to light that Llewynne really was planning to attack... and now I had survived the spellcaster transformation. This must have served as proof enough for Alan to change his mind.

As a result, his strong sense of integrity dictated that he owed me an immediate apology. Even if it meant bending the knee to a servant in front of his men, he cared more about righting his wrongdoing. I respected that, so I didn’t try to stop him.

“L-Look, it’s fine, so—”

“No, it’s not ‘fine.’ I hurt you, and I want to make it right.”

On second thought, perhaps it was a mistake to come down off my horse.

I couldn’t bear the sight of him humbling himself a second longer, so I walked up and reached out to touch his shoulder... but then he grabbed my wrist.

“Wha...?!”

The next thing I knew, he bent forward and pressed his forehead to the back of my hand—a gesture of utmost respect from a man to a woman.

“Kiara Cordier, I offer you my deepest apologies. I won’t ask for your forgiveness, but when you have the time, please tell me what I can do to make it up to you.”

“Make it up to me?! Uhhh...” The ultra-public setting only served to make this dramatic apology all the more intense, and the pressure was quickly getting to me. “Well, for starters, I wish you would’ve been more discreet about this.”

Alan rose to his feet. Judging from the smile on his face, he felt better now

that he'd said his piece.

"I didn't want to leave any room for further misunderstandings. Regardless, what's done is done, so I'm afraid that is one wish I cannot grant. Speak to me again when you have an alternative solution."

With that, Alan climbed back onto his horse and gave the signal for his soldiers to begin the march home. I stared blankly after him... until I heard Cain chuckling at me, that is. When I turned to look at him, he reached out and helped me back onto the horse.

"It would appear Lord Alan got the better of you this time."

"Ugh, tell me about it. I wish you would've stopped him. He listens to you, you know."

"You know what sort of person he is. Once he decides to do something, he takes action right away without giving anyone else the chance to argue. Besides, don't you feel better now that it's all settled?"

Admittedly, a weight had been lifted from my shoulders now that I knew I was no longer under suspicion.

"You young kids are so emotionally constipated," Horace sighed.

I attempted to strangle him for commenting on my business, but as he was merely a statue, this seemed to have no effect. *Grrrr*.

Once we headed out, it took us approximately two hours to arrive home. When we got there, we saw an army marching on the castle—one bearing yellow flags with black lions painted upon them.

It was Llewyrne.

"How?! Why?!"

I didn't understand how this was possible. Why, just this morning, we'd received word that the enemy was still nowhere to be seen! Not only that, but Lord Évrard had left with an army of a thousand soldiers shortly afterward, claiming he "couldn't afford to wait until the next scout returned." This was right around the same time our monster dispatch squad headed out, too!

So how on earth did the Llewyrnian army already have our castle surrounded?

Did they really steamroll His Lordship's army that easily? Sure, the enemy seemed to have the advantage in terms of size, but I wasn't experienced enough to be able to ballpark their numbers at a glance... and the lack of information had me in a panic.

"Sir Cain! Please hurry!"

"I hear you," he replied, grimacing as he spurred his horse faster.

We were traveling at such a clip that I was in danger of falling off altogether, so he wrapped one arm tightly around me. Meanwhile, it took everything I had to keep hold of the saddle with one hand and Horace with the other.

This reaction wasn't unique to just us, mind you. Our entire force was now in a desperate hurry to get back to the castle... but not all of us had horses. Alan would normally never leave his foot soldiers behind, but the circumstances were dire; he gave them instructions for what to do in the worst-case scenario, then galloped off with us.

Someone please tell me they're still alive!

If the siege had already begun, then I was of a mind to run right in and fight back with all my power. I didn't have a single moment to lose. If they died, then everything I did to protect them would have been in vain.

As I clung to the horse, images rose to the forefront of my mind—images of Reggie's bloody body lying lifeless on the ground.

Please let him be safe in the castle. That's all I ask. Please, please, please!

Soon we arrived at a lookout location, shielded from view by trees and large boulders. From there, we had an optimal view of the situation: waves upon waves of foot soldiers, marching forward over the hills to our beloved old castle. With each passing moment, the yellow Llewynian flag loomed closer and closer to our home... and the only thing stopping them was a shower of arrows from the archers standing atop the castle walls.

While the archers were busy nocking their next arrows, the Llewynian soldiers, in their dark-colored armor, lowered their shields and took a few more steps. They were carrying long ladders, too—were they planning to climb over the walls? There were probably more soldiers ramming the gates, too, though

we couldn't see from this angle.

"Where's my father...?" Alan mumbled as he stared in disbelief.

No one knew the answer. Ideally, the troops dispatched from the branch estate would have arrived by now, but if the enemy was currently marching on the castle unopposed, then we clearly didn't manage to rally many drafted soldiers at all.

I felt dizzy and sick to my stomach. This was almost exactly like the prologue to the RPG. At the rate we were going, we would lose the battle... and Reggie and Lady Évrard and everyone else in the castle would probably lose their lives.

We only had one weapon at our disposal. Only one of us possessed the power to take on an army of a thousand soldiers... and that person was me.

I slid down off of Cain's horse and pressed my hand to the ground. I knew the steps—now I just needed to create a giant golem, like the ones Game-Kiara would always summon in the RPG!

"Now just a moment, my young disciple."

"Don't stop me, Master!" *Can't you see what's happening right in front of us?!*

But right as I turned back to argue, Horace hopped down to the ground and landed gracefully on his stubby little feet. One look at his face, and the panic inside me fizzled out. It felt like I'd been snapped back to reality—probably because his bug-eyed countenance reminded me so strongly of his human form. Then I remembered everyone's reactions to seeing him for the first time.

A laugh welled up in my chest, but didn't quite leave my lips. Once my panic and restlessness faded, what settled in its place was deep despair. My eyes burned hot.

"Master..."

"Now, now, don't you go giving me the waterworks! Sentimentality's never been my style, so I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree. Eeeheehee!"

"But... I mean, how do you intend to fight them, then, if not with magic?!" I whimpered.

"Let me guess: you were going to call up a giant golem and try to crush them

underfoot. Well, you might want to look a bit closer. After all, you wouldn't want to step on your friends, now would you?"

"My friends...?"

Inhaling sharply, I looked out across the hills once more. It was a sea of dark armor, with only the Llewynian flag standing tall. But in the far, far distance, I could see a tiny skirmish.

I could make out some bright sparks—big ones, too, not the stray embers of a torch. And I could hear screaming.

"Wait... Is that magic?!"

"Indeed. Now that I've lost my human form, I can tell you that these people have been planning to use defective spellcasters in battle to make up for the lack of real ones. Perhaps there's one of 'em right over there."

"That's even *worse!*" I shouted.

Even a defective spellcaster could cause massive damage flinging their spells around. They were not an enemy to be taken lightly, and yet Horace merely cackled.

"Take a moment and think about it, you sorry excuse for a disciple! If they've been forced to send in a defective, don't you think there might be a good reason for that? A *formidable opponent*, perhaps?"

"Huh?"

Then it hit me.

"Are you saying my father's over there fighting them?!" Alan cut in suddenly.

"I can't say for sure, but if your old man's currently leading an army, then there's a chance it's him."

There's a chance His Lordship is still alive? My spirits lifted a tiny fraction. Alan was looking a lot calmer, too—this must have offered him a ray of hope.

But then Master Horace snuffed it out again.

"Not to mention the other problem: you won't be able to wield magic entirely at will! Heehee!"

“Why not?”

“That contract stone’s barely had any time to integrate into your system. If you overuse your magic before it’s ready, it will start to consume you, just like it did during the initial transformation. And while you can get away with little spells like transferring my soul and digging my grave, golems are a different story. You want to wipe out an army of this size, you’ll need maybe ten or so... and you’re not yet strong enough to handle that strain. You’ll die, kid! Pffheeheehee!”

I bit my lip. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid more than any other... but at the same time, I didn’t want to risk getting Reggie killed by playing it too safe.

Horace seemed to intuit this.

“Think of it this way, little disciple. Imagine a river. If you drop in a single stone, it’ll only get pushed downstream. What must you do, then, to redirect the flow?”

At that moment, an epiphany struck me so hard that it felt like sparks were shooting from my eyelashes.

The enemy forces were currently divided between two tasks: invading the castle and defeating Lord Évrard. At my current strength, I could only create one golem at the most. If I were to place that golem in front of the castle gates, the enemy soldiers would prioritize defeating their human opponent, since he was comparatively easier to fight than a massive stone automaton. And since I was unable to summon a second golem, I would be unable to protect His Lordship.

But if I used the golem to fight alongside the margrave, the enemies would turn and flood the gates instead. Again, it would seem like the easier of the two tasks by comparison. No matter which one I chose, I was looking at an endless game of cat and mouse. And if I tried to save both, my magic would burn out, and I would be rendered powerless to help anyone.

It was like placing sandbags to fight off a flood—a stopgap solution at best. So what would be a more efficient way of keeping the Llewynian army away from the castle...?

Then Alan chimed in.

“Their front lines consist not of speedy cavalry but foot soldiers, most of them drafted civilians. They’re acting on instructions from their commanding officer—probably a knight on horseback who can run around barking orders as the situation requires. I expect this officer is positioned near the center of the platoon.”

I imagined the commanding officer as a sandbank, sitting high above the flow of the soldiers. They would probably have a few additional knights with them for added protection.

“The foot soldiers can only move a short distance once per turn, and they can’t take action without orders from above. But the knights can travel much greater distances, so if a golem spawned within their range, they’d... run off to fight it? In which case...”

I tried to envision this battle like a map from the RPG, but quickly found it was too much to juggle in my head at once. So instead I picked up a rock, crouched down, and started to draw in the bare earth nearby.

“How’s this, Master Horace?”

“Oho! Good, good.”

Horace murmured in approval as I drew up a quick map, marking the enemy units’ positions as I went—“K” for the knights, “F” for the foot soldiers, and “S” for the defective spellcaster.

Then, following some feedback from Cain and Alan, I drew a second, revised map. The two of them nodded, and Horace let out a mischievous cackle.

Our plan was set.

“I’m going to defeat the enemy general, Alan... and you’re coming with me, Sir Cain.” I pressed a hand to the ground. “Now come on out, golem!”

In my mind’s eye, I envisioned the way Game-Kiara cast her golem-summoning magic. Slowly but surely, I gathered the mana that matched my own. Per my request, these mana particles altered their atomic structure... and once the process was complete, it manifested before me as a large, square-

shaped golem—a perfect recreation of what I had imagined.

It was bipedal, sort of like a robot, except built out of stone. At its fullest height, I estimated it was about the size of a fully grown tree—approximately ten meters tall. Sensing my silent wishes, the golem turned in the direction of the Llewynian army and took off running.

Naturally, the enemy soldiers sensed the strange, rhythmic vibrations and began to panic.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Earthquake?!”

The vibrations were accompanied by a loud rumbling sound, almost like something very, very large was running their way.

Then one of them quickly noticed the cloud of dust the golem was kicking up as it ran, and when he squinted at it to get a better look... he screamed.

“What the hell is *that*?!”

They pointed and stared at the freakish brown monstrosity that towered over them. With the dandelions and dead leaves poking out here and there, it was clear the creature was made of soil... and the second they caught sight of the dark, empty eye sockets embedded in its square-shaped head, the Llewynian soldiers all broke into a run.

“Aaah!”

With no one left to help him carry his ladder, one of the soldiers fell to the ground, pinned under the heavy metal. As the golem walked over him, he was summarily flattened into the earth... and just like that, he was gone.

The golem kicked up the grass as it walked. One of the slower soldiers ended up on the receiving end of a hard stone kick; he went flying, and when he landed, he fell still.

Other soldiers stared in horrified shock as the golem passed by, followed by about twenty knights on horseback. Their blue cloaks marked them as Farzian soldiers, but not one of the Llewynians moved to attack. These men had a reasonable amount of experience fighting monsters, but nothing remotely on

the same scale as a *golem*.

As they stood stock-still, another wave of arrows rained down from the castle walls, striking down those who weren't paying proper attention and further adding to the chaos.

Of course, this wasn't to say that the Llewynian army was entirely devoid of soldiers brave enough to take up arms against a stone giant. A handful of knights dashed out from the commander's squad to swing their swords at the golem... but to no avail. Then the Farzian knights rushed in, their horses kicking up grass and dust. It was as if the golem had carved a path just for them.

And by "Farzian knights," I was, of course, referring to our group.

"Are we there yet?!"

"Almost! Ignore them and keep going!"

We rode our horses at a careful distance behind the golem—Alan on his horse and Cain and I on ours, plus a handful of other knights. We couldn't risk getting too close lest the golem accidentally kick us, but if we lagged too far behind, the enemy soldiers might snap to their senses and attack us. After all, compared to a massive unfeeling automaton that was potentially invulnerable, a soft, fleshy, 100 percent mortal human being was easily the more appealing opponent.

We cut across the battlefield, attempting to draw the Llewynian army's attention away from the castle. Our destination: the place where I'd witnessed sparks flying... and where we hoped to find friendly forces led by Lord Évrard.

This golem was actually a lot faster than I'd anticipated. I was expecting it to sort of trudge along, but instead, it lifted its knees in a full run. While its movements were sluggish, its stride was rather long. As a result, our horses had to work hard to keep up.

Personally, I was afraid my magic would stop working if I let the golem stray too far from me, and so I requested we keep our horses at a very specific distance. Fortunately, since we were traveling at close to maximum speed, our destination quickly came into view.

Meanwhile, the Llewynian army was slow to react. They focused entirely on getting out of the golem's way, then stood there and stared after us until it was

too late to give chase. In video game terms, it was as though we were inflicting a stun status effect and making them waste a turn.

But this hypnosis didn't last long. Because the golem was highly visible from a distance, the soldiers ahead of us were more easily able to recover. Sure enough, the Llewynian knights were starting to band together. Meanwhile, it was taking everything I had just to keep the golem going.

"Nngh... I wish I could create a mud wall with one hand or something..."

Now nestled in the rucksack on my back, Horace let out another one of his trademark cackles. "Eeeheehee! Don't get greedy, little rookie. Baby steps."

He was right, of course. I knew that. Obviously, I wasn't going to be able to toss out spells left and right when I was basically Level 1. And if I prematurely pushed myself to the point of a dusty death, then our battle plan was screwed. I couldn't risk it. I was just going to have to make do with what I could manage.

Meanwhile, the golem continued to jog along, serving as our shield. We were moving at a breakneck pace past thousands of enemy soldiers, and yet the thought of being near the elite Llewynian knights terrified me so much that it felt like we were moving in slow motion. Time itself had slowed to a crawl.

Every time I caught sight of a corpse trampled by the golem or riddled with arrows, I reflexively squeezed my eyes shut and hunched down, bracing myself against the nightmare happening all around me. This was my first time witnessing people die in battle, and it made me sick to my stomach with fear.

But whenever my emotional state wavered, the golem's stability was impacted in turn. So instead I forced myself to stare straight ahead. *Don't look down, don't look down...* Then I felt Cain's arm tighten around me and realized he must have sensed my fear. Quietly, I willed myself to focus on my mission.

At last, the crowd parted ahead of us, and a bright flame came into view. The time had come.

"We're here!"

I hastily commanded the golem to stop, and it obeyed, kicking up a dust cloud as it slowed. Before us was a lone figure, flinging fireballs and making them explode. This defective spellcaster could attack from a considerable range, and

anyone who approached him was quickly forced to retreat. He wore dark leather armor concealed beneath a black cloak; smoke rose up from its fabric as though it were on fire.

Then I realized: Llewyne must have sacrificed one of its foot soldiers to create a defective spellcaster at the last minute.

“How awful...”

Standing on the front lines as an ordinary soldier, death was always a risk—but at least there was a chance you could avoid it. Now that he was a defective spellcaster, though, he would never be able to escape it. And when it caught up to him, it would be agonizingly painful.

There was no saving him. The most merciful thing I could do for him would be to put him out of his misery.

But before I could command my golem, someone shot past me.

“HAAAAAAHH!”

With a battle cry, Alan dashed boldly into the scattering sparks and swung his longsword. The blade hit its mark, and blood gushed from the defective spellcaster’s head. When he crumpled to the ground, he promptly dissolved into dust, blood and all.

Meanwhile, Alan glared around at the other soldiers nearby. They were all enrobed in blue cloaks—foot soldiers with lances, and cavalry knights just behind them. In the center was a man wearing a helmet with a teal tassel.

“Father!” Alan shouted.

The man lifted his hand in a wave; likewise, the other blue-cloaked soldiers grinned and waved.

It’s him... His Lordship is alive!

Relief washed over me... and the next moment, it felt like I was going to pass out.

“It’s time for the next phase of our plan,” Cain reminded me right in the nick of time, and I managed to hold out.

Then we turned our horse around, and there I realized that the Llewynian soldiers had formed a loose circle around us, trying to box us in without getting too close to their defective spellcaster. Fortunately, I had come up with a backup plan for this exact situation.

“Alan, we’re moving on to the next phase!” I called.

He turned away from his father and back to me, his expression hard. “You sure you’ll be alright?”

“I’ll have to be. I’m our only hope.”

No more needed to be said between us. He turned back and addressed his knights, plus the margrave and his army of approximately 500 soldiers, giving them a rough outline of our plan. Then he glanced over at me and gave me a nod.

“Thank you for all your help, Sir Cain,” I said as I slid down off his horse. From here on, this was a solo mission; the horse would only get in my way.

And yet, for some reason, Cain hopped down with me.

“Huh?”

In a blink, he jogged over and entrusted his horse to one of the margrave’s soldiers.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted.

“I’m coming with you,” Cain replied... and then he scooped me up into his arms.

“Wh—*Sir Cain*?!”

I could try to flail my way out of it, but I didn’t want to risk kicking him, nor did I want him to drop me. Meanwhile, he fixed me with his most dashing smile.

“Now you’ll have no choice but to let me accompany you.”

“But... there’s a reason I need to do this alone!”

“Oh, I won’t get in your way. I merely figured you could use someone to help you escape in the event you expend the last of your strength.”

From up close, I could see that his smile didn’t reach his eyes. He was serious.

I pursed my lips.

“I know you’re exhausted,” he pressed.

He was right, of course, but I couldn’t afford to admit it—otherwise, I’d lose my nerve. I was starting to feel nauseous from all the intense concentration required to control the golem.

“Lady Évrard only let us borrow you under the condition that I protect you at all costs. I’m afraid I can’t go against her orders.”

At this, I finally gave in. We had no time to waste; the enemy soldiers wouldn’t remain stunned forever, and my capacity for magic was limited. I lowered the golem’s hand to the ground, and Cain carried me on. From there, we moved up to its shoulder.

“Whoa... There are so many of them...”

I grimaced. The sheer number of soldiers covering the land completely blew me away; I wasn’t yet skilled at estimating numbers by eye, but I was convinced there had to be at least ten thousand down there, just as Cain and Alan had predicted.

If Llewyne had managed to surprise us with this massive army, we probably would have had no choice but to run for our lives. Even with advance warning, we still barely managed to prepare for it. If we were going to turn the tide of this battle, it certainly wasn’t going to happen quickly—but we still had a chance. And I was going to do everything in my power to try.

I scanned the vicinity, then gestured for Cain to set me down on the golem’s shoulder. Now that I was a bit more rested, I had no trouble standing on my own two feet. Next, I created a little protective enclosure embedded in the shoulder for the two of us to stand in so we wouldn’t run the risk of tumbling off every time the golem took a step.

A few moments later, a flurry of arrows flew up at us. Now that I was standing on the golem’s shoulder, Llewyne had surely identified me as the spellcaster in control, since they were paying close attention. For a second I was scared the arrows might actually reach past our barricade, but fortunately, they fell short of the mark.

Truth be told, prior to that moment, I wasn't 100 percent sure this defensive measure would be enough. After all, arrows were quite swift, and we were practically sitting ducks up here. Thankfully, it looked like we were safe for now.

My gaze drifted to the castle. I estimated we were about twenty golem-sized steps away. At first, I felt relieved to know we were so close at hand... but then I caught sight of someone standing atop the castle walls. Because of his blue cloak, I initially mistook him for a foot soldier, but then I noticed his was a different length than the others.

What caught my attention was his perfect form... but then I recognized his pale military uniform and nearly screamed.

"Why is he up there?! No! Someone get him inside!"

It was Reggie, his long silver ponytail fluttering in the breeze. Images from the RPG flitted through my mind, and my knees quivered, threatening to buckle. He was a prime target for a sniper up there! The battlements were the first line of defense in the event that Llewynne broke through the gates!

I rounded on Cain and seized him by the collar. "Sir Cain, please—*do something*! He'll get shot up there!"

"Calm down, Miss Kiara," he replied calmly. "His Highness will be just fine. The only place higher than the curtain walls would be the main tower. With the current winds, the enemy archers can't hit him."

"But..."

God, what if the RPG prologue comes true?!

I glared at Reggie, but the distance between us was too great. He smiled and raised a hand in my direction.

The next moment, straw spilled out from between the gaps in the battlements, followed by some sort of liquid.

"Is that oil?"

The enemy soldiers backed up a bit. Evidently they were of the same mind as Cain. And as long as they didn't get splashed by the oil, they had nothing to fear from fire arrows; they could simply wait for the fire to die out.

Sure enough, on Reggie's signal, the archers shot their fire arrows straight down at the ground, and the scattered straw immediately caught fire.

"Look at the smoke!"

This was by no means ordinary smoke. It formed a thick green cloud that hung low over the ground, steadily engulfing the enemy soldiers. At first, they held their positions, but as soon as they came into contact with it, they fell writhing to the ground. Some of them crawled around desperately, seeking an exit. Meanwhile, the soldiers in the back saw this and bolted. Instantly, their front line was in shambles.

"What kind of smoke is that? Is it poisonous? But the castle—oh."

At last, I realized what was going on.

Change of plans.

Swallowing hard, I waved down at Alan. "Head straight to the castle gates!"

He must have heard me, because I saw him nod in response. Then he and the rest of his group took off running.

"Hold on tight, Sir Cain!"

Focusing intently, I commanded the golem to run ahead of Alan. The castle was actually closer than I'd estimated—just ten steps away. And once we'd taken eight of those steps, I had the golem make a 90-degree turn.

Clearly the enemy soldiers had assumed the golem would follow along with Alan, because they only moved slightly out of our way... but now I was charging right at them.

"Nngh...!"

I pursed my lips tightly. We were almost certainly trampling dozens of people underfoot right now, but I couldn't afford to think about it. I couldn't risk feeling fear. All I could do was focus on controlling the golem. I was trying my best not to move its upper body much, but I couldn't keep its shoulders from jostling violently with every step. If I relaxed for even a moment, we'd both surely plummet to our deaths.

"Whoa!"

At first, Cain was a bit perplexed by my actions, but he quickly adapted. He grabbed my arm to hold me steady—something I greatly appreciated. As soon as we made it back into the castle, I planned to thank him profusely.

Down on the ground, the rest of the Llewynian soldiers were in a panic. Not that I blamed them, since they had just watched a giant stone golem mow down their comrades. Their coordination was a total mess; some were shooting arrows up at us while others were just trying to make sure they didn't get trampled.

Meanwhile, Alan and his team stormed straight into the castle. Their objective was to ensure the safety of the margrave. After all, His Lordship had been battling Llewyn for hours; he'd started the day with a thousand soldiers, and now he was down to less than half. The man was surely exhausted, both physically and emotionally. No way could he fight his way back into the castle unassisted—hence our plan.

Step one: make the enemy think the golem was headed for the gates, forcing them to get out of the way. Step two: have Alan and his team escort his father down the newly created path.

Fortunately, His Lordship's army was close enough for the plan to work. Plus, Reggie's toxic smoke helped discourage the enemy soldiers from approaching the gates. He had carefully positioned the fumes so that they wouldn't block our path, either.

Now Alan and his team would have a relatively straight shot to the castle gates; meanwhile, I attacked the Llewynian army. With Cain's support, I was able to focus fully on manipulating my golem. Unfortunately, it pained me to do this.

How many people had I crushed underfoot? How many had died from a single stone kick? As I forced myself not to think about it, I finally spotted my target: a group of knights wearing majestic capes and carrying the Llewynian flag. I could see something sparkling on their chests... Medals, perhaps.

Closing my eyes, I charged my golem right through them. Then, when we reached the other side, I turned it around.

I have to check. I have to make sure I killed them.

The thought sent a shiver down my spine, and I felt like I was going to be sick. My control on the golem weakened; its left arm crumbled into soil and fell to the ground.

The next thing I knew, Cain pulled me into his arms and pressed me against his chest so I couldn't see a thing.

"Quickly, now. Have this thing walk straight forward."

I tried to say *okay*, but my voice wouldn't come out. Instead, I focused on the golem's legs, just as Cain had instructed. Once again, we took off at a run, charging forward—but this time, we crouched down so the arrows wouldn't hit us. If it hadn't been for the enclosure keeping us safe, we surely would have hit the ground.

Cain must have realized what was upsetting me, hence his shielding me from the view. If he hadn't, the whole golem might have fallen apart in response to my unstable emotions.

"Just ten more steps."

Having regained a small amount of composure, I looked up. The enemy's front lines were in shambles, with everyone fleeing the golem in all directions, but at the castle gates, the war waged on. Evidently, some of the Llewynian knights were more committed to their cause than others. Alan and his team were now the last line of defense keeping them out.

We needed to open the gates to let the margrave's group inside—and naturally, this was the perfect opportunity for the enemy as well. Or perhaps their *only* opportunity, considering we had a giant golem on our side. Thus, Alan was forced to fight off the opposing forces while the margrave and his men slipped in through a tiny gap in the gates, one at a time.

I wanted to help them. Exhausted as I was, I was still lucid enough to see that we needed to be rid of the enemy posthaste. Unfortunately, however, I just didn't have it in me. It was taking all my remaining strength just to make it back to the castle.

Still, I needed a plan if I wanted to get inside anytime soon. I considered jumping from the golem's shoulder to the curtain wall, but I could tell that the

golem would crumble the second I stepped away from it. This would inevitably form a giant dirt pile right next to the wall which the enemy could then climb up to invade the castle. Obviously we couldn't let that happen, so I'd have to dismantle the golem from a distance.

I commanded the golem to slowly kneel down—or so I thought, but I'd misjudged my speed.

“Aaaagh!”

Horace let out a muffled scream from inside my rucksack as we plummeted to the ground. I could feel Cain suck in a breath, too. The feeling was reminiscent of an amusement park freefall ride from my past life. Unfortunately, I had never been big on those sorts of rides, and my fear only made things worse. Before long, I had lost control of the golem completely.

And so our ride crumbled back into dirt—but fortunately for us, this soft soil created a pillow of sorts that cushioned our landing. I knew I'd screwed up, but there was no time to feel sorry for myself. I needed to keep moving.

When I tried to get to my feet, however, my body was shaking so badly that I couldn't keep myself upright. Luckily, I had a friend with me—a friend who was strong enough to carry me when my own legs failed me. Blearily, I opened my eyes. Sure enough, it was Cain.



“Hold on tight!”

And with that, he took off running.

Naturally, the enemy soldiers saw this as an elusive chance to defeat the Farzian spellcaster. The loud clanging of metal made me flinch, and I realized the Llewynian army was charging at us—at *me*.

Just then, Alan rode up on horseback, wielding a lance he must’ve acquired from who knows where. He mowed down four soldiers with a single sweep, and I found myself captivated. Truly, he possessed the strength and skill befitting a protagonist.

Meanwhile, Cain carried me closer and closer to the castle. Unfortunately, we didn’t have a clear path inside—there was a sea of black and blue cloaks in front of us, struggling, and blades flying wildly about. Breathing hard, with a helpless girl in his arms, Cain stood out like a sore thumb... and yet I didn’t have the courage to ask him to escape without me.

I was so terrified of dying, I’d spent the past two years doing everything in my power to avoid it. And yet, even now, in the midst of a crisis I was powerless to solve on my own, somehow I *still* refused to give in to my fate. All I could do was apologize to Cain and Alan afterward for being such a burden. Again and again, I cursed myself for being so weak—but right as I squeezed my eyes shut, I heard a voice.

“Kiara!”

Just as Cain reaffixed his grip on me, the gates swung open and a veritable avalanche of soldiers poured out. One by one, they struck down the Llewynian soldiers who were giving Alan and his men so much trouble. Meanwhile, the rest of us hurried inside. Then the gate closed back up, and the metal portcullis slid down.

As the sounds of fighting faded into the distance, I heaved a sigh of relief. *Safe at last*. My eyelids drooped, and my consciousness slowly slipped away.

Just then, I felt someone touch my cheek.

“Foolish girl...”

Next, I felt someone else lift me out of Cain's arms, and as I took in his scent, I thought vaguely to myself, *Oh, good, Reggie's alive.*

That was the last thing that crossed my mind before it all faded to black.

Side Story: The Midnight Lesson

Quietly, I opened my bedroom door.

It was just past one in the morning, and the halls of Évrard Castle were perfectly silent. There were candles lit here and there, faintly illuminating the walls and floor—this was meant to discourage any criminal activity.

Unfortunately, the firelight of this world was nowhere near as bright as the electricity I had enjoyed in my past life. But though this near-darkness might have been frightening in my past life, I had now spent fourteen years in this less-advanced world, so to me, it was perfectly ordinary.

At the Patriciél estate, the interior was always well-lit with dozens upon dozens of candles (how the count could possibly afford so many, I'd never know), but the boarding school had no such luxury, so I quickly gained a sense for how to move about in the dark.

“Off to the kitchen...”

I gently closed my bedroom door behind me, then set off down the hall. I hadn't lived here at Évrard Castle for very long, but I at least knew my way to the kitchen; after all, it was where servants went to fetch tea and snacks as well as take meals during breaks.

A cold snap had set in just yesterday, and I could feel the floor's chill through my thin fabric slippers. I'd put off getting myself some winter shoes since autumn wasn't quite over, but now I realized what a mistake that was. *No matter what the weather's like tomorrow, I'll go and buy some proper shoes, just to be safe.*

Arriving at the kitchen, I located the water jug and poured some into my glass decanter. *Mission complete.* With that, I promptly headed back to my room.

The castle was eerily quiet at night. There were guards on patrol outside, of course, but everyone inside was fast asleep at this hour. This meant that every tiny sound carried farther than it would have otherwise—the pitter-patter of

my footsteps, the sloshing of the water as I headed back up the stairs, the high-pitched creak of a door opening somewhere... *Wait, who was that?*

At the top of the stairs, I looked down the hallway in the direction of the sound... and my eyes met Reggie's as he peered out from inside his quarters. Evidently, I wasn't the only one awake at this hour.

Though he was just a year older than me, the dark woolen robe he was wearing made him look quite grown-up. Beneath it, he was wearing a plain white shirt with dark-colored trousers—probably his pajamas—and although they were visibly tailor-made, I could tell at a glance they weren't made of silk. Probably for the best, given the approaching winter.

Considering I was technically a guest here, I felt a bit guilty sneaking around in the middle of the night. In my embarrassment, I blurted out the first thing I could think of.

"Um... Want some?"

I held up the decanter. Blinking in surprise, Reggie smiled slightly and waved me over. Personally, I wasn't sure I was permitted to enter a prince's quarters this late at night.

"If you're worried about Mabel, don't be. She's sleeping in the room next door."

Since it was freezing out here in the hallway, I decided to go ahead and take him up on his invitation.

As soon as I crossed over the threshold, I was greeted by the gentle warmth of the fireplace. Had Reggie lit it himself? Or had Mabel stayed up late tending to it so His Highness could sleep?

The interior was decorated with cutesy pastel landscape paintings and a beautiful woven tapestry hanging near the bed. This caught me by surprise. After all, the Évrard family generally didn't bother with vain and ostentatious displays. Here on the border, where Salekhard or Llewyne could strike at any time, they prioritized function over form.

Inside, Reggie handed me a wooden cup. "For your water," he explained.

“Thank you.”

I was dying of thirst, so I poured myself a cup and promptly downed it. As the cold liquid slid down my throat, the chill made me shiver in spite of the heat from the fire. How I yearned to crawl under a nice, warm blanket.

But the whole reason I came in was to share my water, so I refilled the cup and handed it back to Reggie. He drank it down gratefully.

“Is that what woke you?” he asked. “Were you just thirsty?”

“That’s part of it, yeah. What about you?”

“I had another bad dream.”

Every now and then, I would wake up in the middle of the night and have trouble going back to sleep. Still, I enjoyed sleeping, since there was a chance I might dream of my past life. Sure, it wasn’t all sunshine and roses—sometimes my parents would argue, or my friends would get in a fight—but it was still a drastic improvement over this cold, unfeeling world I now found myself in.

“Anyway, don’t worry about me. I’ll be back to sleep in no time. What about you, Reggie?”

“Oh, I’ve always been a light sleeper.”

You poor thing. “Should we try to find some way to help you sleep?” I asked out of sympathy.

He cocked an eyebrow and smiled. “Got anything in mind?”

I paused to think, but only a few things came to mind, and lullabies were absolutely out of the question. If our nation’s prince ever heard my terrible singing voice, I would probably die of embarrassment... so I decided to suggest something a bit more reasonable.

“Have you tried counting sheep?”

“Sheep?”

“Yeah.”

He looked at me, puzzled; I shoed him into bed and carried a chair over so I could sit next to him.

“Now lie down and close your eyes...”

With a playful grin, he did as I requested, and I pulled his blankets and quilts up to his chin. For the first time, he looked like any other teenage boy.

“You don’t have to say it out loud with me; just count in your head. One sheep, two sheep, three sheep...”

As I counted, I found myself looking at Reggie’s face... at his long silver eyelashes. He was so beautiful, I could only imagine what his parents must have looked like. His Aunt Beatrice was a beautiful woman, too. Perhaps all royals were naturally attractive.

Once I got to 34 sheep, Reggie let out a sigh. “Is this supposed to bore me to sleep, or what?”

“Maybe.” It was working its magic on me, at least. My mouth was getting tired, and I was starting to feel drowsy again. “They say you’re guaranteed to fall asleep before you reach one hundred.”

“Okay then, let’s see you prove it.”

With that, Reggie sat up, got out of bed, and knelt beside me.

“What the—whoa!”

“Shhh! Keep your voice down or you’ll wake Mabel.”

In a blink, he lifted me into his arms, bridal-style, and laid me to rest in his bed. Next, he pulled my slippers off, and I bit back a squeak as his fingers brushed my toes. Then, before I could protest, he pulled the quilts over me and sat down in my chair. We had now officially traded places.

It was kind of awkward, having someone staring down at me while I was lying in bed. Still... the blankets were toasty warm from his residual body heat, right down to my feet. Clearly he had better blood circulation than I did.



Grinning, Reggie placed a hand near my face. “This time, I’ll do the counting.”

Evidently he wanted to test the validity of my chosen method. *Wait, I can’t sleep here! Sure, we’re both still technically children, but we’re teenagers! We can’t share a room together!*

Besides, I’d feel terrible if it meant Reggie was forced to sleep on the sofa instead. And if Mabel caught us, she’d probably get on my case for being improper with the prince!

But before I could tell him I’d changed my mind, he started to count.

“One Kiara, two Kiaras...”

“Wait, what?”

“Three Kiaras, four Kiaras...”

“Why me?!” *Are you trying to say I’m a sheep?!*

Reggie snickered. “Because it’s more fun for me this way. Five Kiaras. Besides, you’re not that different from a sheep. Six Kiaras.”

“How?!”

“Because you’re cute and fluffy. Seven Kiaras.”

“If you’re going to liken me to a cute animal, pick a cat or something!”

“Fine, then you’re a fluffy little kitten. Eight Kiaras.”

Seriously, Reggie? Ugh... Kill me now!

“I’m enjoying this. If there were eight Kiaras, I bet you’d all get into some sort of mischief together, wouldn’t you? Nine Kiaras.”

“Nngh...”

Judging from the smile on his face, it almost seemed like he *wanted* more Kiaras. *Are you obsessed with me or what?* If I didn’t stop him soon, I was going to die of embarrassment... but at the same time, I couldn’t think of anything that would actually make him stop. All I could do was groan under my breath.

Fortunately, Reggie heard me groaning and took mercy on me. “If you don’t want me to count Kiaras, then how about I tell you a bedtime story?”

“Yes, please. I’d prefer that.”

At this point, *anything* would be less embarrassing than counting Kiaras. And if it made Reggie happy, then so be it. After he finished his story, I’d tell him it was my turn and switch places with him. Then, once he was asleep, I’d go back to my room. That was the plan.

“Once upon a time, there was a royal prince. He met a woman, fell in love at first sight, and married her.”

I hadn’t heard this story before, but then again, my experience with bedtime stories was limited to begin with—in this world, at least. I figured maybe this was one of the more well-known tales.

“The couple was soon blessed with a child, and the prince lived happily with his wife and son. But his father, the king, was none too pleased, for the prince’s wife was noble in name only. Though she was by no means ugly, and reasonably capable in most areas, she was not exceptionally skilled or beautiful... and His Majesty would accept nothing less than an omnipotent goddess.”

At this point, I was expecting this to turn into a story where the prince’s wife worked hard to change the king’s mind... but then things took a turn for the dark.

“The king wanted only the best for his handsome, talented son, whose only ‘flaw’ was his poor taste in women. Then, when his grandson was born even more handsome than his daddy, the king resented the prince’s wife more than ever. And after the prince fell ill and passed away at an early age, the king’s resentment manifested in his behavior: he kicked the prince’s widow out of the royal palace.”

Reggie was recounting the story slowly, but it was still a lot to say all at once. He paused for a few breaths, then continued.

“After that, the widow lived in a mansion away from the castle... but she disappeared after she was attacked by bandits. In order to ease his guilty conscience, the king then told his grandson that his mother had run away of her own accord.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. This story was too realistic to be a fairy tale

and *far* too dark to tell a child at bedtime. Was it some sort of parable passed down in the royal family? Was “choose your wife wisely” the moral of the story? I decided to ask Reggie flat-out; he smiled awkwardly.

“No, there’s no lesson to be learned from what happened.”

“Wait... Are you saying this is a true story?”

He smiled wordlessly at me. *Oh god, he’s not denying it!*

“Actually, now that I think about it, maybe there is a lesson: the prince should have called his father out on his asinine behavior. And the prince’s wife knew the king hated her, so she should have at least *pretended* to try to be better. But they were so busy being in love with each other, they didn’t pay attention to anyone else. They were too trusting. And as a result, the prince forgot about his limited lifespan, and his widow was met with a horrible end. You could say it’s a precautionary tale about a failure of a man who couldn’t even keep his own loved ones safe.”

Ouch. “That’s pretty harsh for a fairytale, Reggie.”

“I think it’s important to reflect on past mistakes. That way you can learn for next time. If you’re smart, anyway.”

Deep down, was Reggie always this sarcastic about everything?

“You’ll go bald from thinking too hard, you know,” I muttered under my breath.

He stared at me, mouth agape—a reaction I’d never seen from him before. As for me, I sincerely meant what I said. Stress was a common cause of hair thinning, and as a prince, Reggie was under a *lot* of stress. But he was a handsome guy, so I wanted him to keep his flowing silver locks for decades to come. Before I could explain this, however, he started laughing.

“No one’s ever said that to me in my life!”

“Oh... Right... I guess that’s kind of offensive to say to a prince. I’m sorry.”

I was so used to thinking of him as a friend, it was easy to forget that he was at the very top of the social hierarchy. No one in their right mind would make that sort of comment in the presence of royalty.

“There’s no need to apologize, Kiara. I want you to treat me like a peer. Isn’t that what you were doing?”

“Uhh, I guess...?”

Did aristocrat boys tease each other about their hairlines in this world, too?
Maybe I should ask Alan about it sometime.

“Well, whatever. Now it’s your turn to tell a story.”

“Okay...”

It was then that I realized I had forgotten to pretend to be sleepy, and so my plan had failed. With no other choice left, I decided to toss out a quick fairy tale, then go back to my room once I was finished... but which one? I’d only heard two or three of the more common Farzian fairy tales.

The girls at my boarding school, however, seemed to know quite a few. They were always name-dropping stories or characters I’d never heard of. Most of these were fanciful romance stories about princes or nobles, or tragic tales of knights who died fighting dragons to protect those they loved. That, or parables about the dangers of marrying commoners. If the love interest wasn’t a noble or a prince, then you could be sure someone in the story was going to die. In my view, it was proof that the fathers of this world only ever saw their daughters as pawns for political marriages. Cynical, I know.

Long story short: the only fairy tales I knew well enough to tell were ones from picture books in my past life.

“Do you mind if it’s something... more obscure?” I asked.

“Go for it,” he replied.

And so I decided to tell him the story of Momotarou the Peach Boy, since that was the one I knew by heart. Fortunately, this world already had plenty of stories about children born from flower dew and whatnot, so the concept of a boy born from a giant peach wasn’t all that outlandish by comparison; Reggie merely wondered if he was the son of the goddess or something. But since Momotarou famously went on to battle demons, I shrugged and went with it.

And so Momotarou headed off on his grand journey, carrying the packed

lunch the old couple prepared for him before he left... Since millet dumplings didn't exist in this world, however, I went ahead and changed it to something else.

Along the way, Momotarou made some animal friends—and then, for the first time, Reggie started asking questions. First, he wanted to know how the animals could possibly talk. After all, in our world, not even the most magical of monsters were capable of human speech. Personally, since this was just a fairy tale, I would've liked him to just let it go, but since he wouldn't, I changed the pheasant to a feathery dancer, the dog to a hunter in pelts, and the monkey to a mischievous, tree-climbing little knave.

Then he wanted to know why Momotarou would give his food to a bunch of animals, but by that point I was too tired to argue, so I changed the animals to human girls and told him they had fallen in love with Momotarou at first sight. Perhaps that was a more believable reason as to why they'd tag along with someone they'd only just met.

Then Reggie snickered at me, and I realized he was probably just messing with me for fun. *What a bully.*

And so, as my drowsiness intensified, Momotarou gathered up his harem of animal girls, and together they defeated the demons. After all my changes, the story had turned into a total mess, so I was worried Reggie hadn't enjoyed it... but my eyelids were too heavy, and I couldn't see his face.

“And they lived happily... ever...”

The protagonist was now a hero, with girls and riches to spare. What more could anyone ask for?

Now that I had finished the story, I found myself drawn to the warmth of Reggie's bed.



He could see her innocent, unguarded face right in front of him, sound asleep.

“You must really feel safe with me,” he muttered aloud.

All his life, Reggie had always been a light sleeper. Fortunately, his body could

run on minimal sleep just fine. Whenever he awoke, he would stare blankly at the ceiling for a while. Normally this helped him go back to sleep, but this time he hadn't been so lucky. So he decided to wander around the Évrard estate for a bit—and that was when he'd spotted Kiara coming up the stairs. She was carrying a decanter full of water, and he quickly intuited that she was on her way back from the kitchen.

He was bored, and since she was awake, he'd decided to invite her into his quarters for the hell of it. But as they talked, he noticed that she was visibly cold—her shoulders were ever so slightly hunched. Evidently, the fireplace wasn't doing much good for her.

That was when he decided to flip things around... and when he scooped her up, he found that her legs were freezing cold. *Poor thing*. She'd probably feel a lot warmer under the blankets. Sure enough, relief flooded her expression, just as he anticipated... and then she nodded off to sleep in the middle of their conversation.

"This is kind of nice."

For some reason, it really warmed his heart to see her fast asleep in his bed. Of course, if it had been anyone else, he would have kicked them out... but in her case, she was reminiscent of a tiny kitten, all curled up. Maybe it was the little smile on her face.

He was tempted to stroke her hair, but he knew if he woke her, she might try to escape... and that frightened him.

He wanted her to stay. Forever.

"Where did you come from, little cat?"

As far as any of them knew, Kiara was raised as an aristocrat, and yet she sincerely seemed to forget that he was the crown prince of Farzia. That was a line not even *Alan* was willing to cross, despite multiple requests on Reggie's part. Who but a commoner could manage such a feat?

Every now and then, her behavior would suggest that she was raised outside the Farzian social hierarchy. Still, she was obliging his desire to be treated as an equal for once, and he had no complaints. In a way, she was a closer friend to

him than his own cousin.

It was strange—their viewpoints were so different, and yet in some respects, it felt like they were a perfect match. How was it possible?

As he gazed at her, his truant drowsiness found its way back to him, and his mind grew fuzzy. He knew he couldn't sleep sitting upright in this chair, lest he catch pneumonia. And yet it felt like such a wasted opportunity to send Kiara back to her own quarters.

Odd... I hardly ever get this sleepy when other people are around.

In the end, he decided he would lie down on the opposite side of the bed. As he crawled in, he was sure the sounds and vibrations would disturb her, and yet she didn't budge. This emboldened him to finally reach out and touch her hair—and in response, she slammed her knee directly into his shin.

"Agh! You're awake...?"

At first, he thought she'd done it on purpose, but she didn't respond to his question. Her eyes remained closed, and her breathing was slow and steady. The sight filled him with the impulse to bully her.

"You know what? I'm *definitely* not letting you go back to your room now."

He rolled away, closed his eyes... and before he knew it, he had drifted off more easily than he ever had sleeping alone.



When I awoke, I found Reggie sleeping in the bed next to me and nearly screamed.

Upon further inspection, I noticed he was all the way on the opposite edge of the bed—which, incidentally, was large enough to fit four people—and there was a rolled-up blanket serving as a divider between us, so there probably hadn't been any funny business.

Unfortunately, all my flailing woke Reggie. He gazed over at me, and there was something about his dazed, drowsy expression that made my heart skip a beat. It was just so... sexy.

After a moment, he started to snicker at me. *What?! What's so funny?! Is*

there something on my face?!

Reluctantly, I decided I'd better get back to my room while it was still dark so Mabel wouldn't find out I was here. Unfortunately, it wasn't until after I was safely back in my own bed that I realized I'd left my decanter behind. In the end, that was what sealed my fate.

The next morning, Mabel tracked both of us down and lectured us for hours on end...

Afterword

My name is Kanata Satsuki, and I am the author of *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!* Thank you so much for reading. Whether you're an avid reader of my books, a faithful fan of the web novel, or a complete newcomer to my works, I'm happy to have you here today.

Enemy! was first published online on a website called *Shousetsuka ni Narou* (and by the time this volume is published, I imagine it'll still be in progress there). I admit, I was really surprised when this title was picked up for formal publication, since it was always something of a self-indulgent story. When they first got in touch, I was so shocked, I must have read and re-read that email at least five times until I finally got my breathing and heart rate under control! I'm still so honored to have my writing printed in book format.

This is the second time I've been formally published, but I wasn't expecting this particular label to get in touch, since they have a lot of cutesy books in their lineup, and *Enemy!* features a bit more violence than your average shoujo novel (which you've probably noticed, if you've read all the way to the afterword). This is a war story, after all. For that reason, I tagged the story with a content warning for "depictions of violence" on *Narou*.

Granted, I do try to keep things on the tame side without getting too grisly, but everybody's comfort zone is different, so I try to be mindful of it when I'm writing.

To tell the truth, I was originally planning to write a much more cutesy story. At first, I just wanted to write a "reincarnated into another world" story, and I thought it would be fun to set it within the world of a video game. From there, I drew up an outline of the romantic plot points. Initially, I was planning to set most of the story within a glamorous royal palace... but then I figured I should write something new for a change, so I decided to just follow my heart. That was when *Enemy!* as you know it was born.

I thought back over all the video games I'd played, and a short while later, I

settled on a strategy RPG for my setting. The end result was something I had absolutely no experience writing: a war story. To this day, writing a new chapter is like pulling teeth, but all I can really say is that I made this bed, and now I have to lie in it.

In this story, the main character Kiara regains her memories of living in Japan and immediately realizes this new world is identical to a video game she used to love. But she's not the protagonist, or even a supporting character—she's a mid-boss! Naturally, she refuses to accept this... but unbeknownst to her, her escape from fate brings her directly into contact with the actual protagonist and his party.

Now, Kiara is by no means a Mary Sue. She *does* have the advantage of foreknowledge in some situations, but she's not especially skillful, nor does she have a photographic memory, nor can she swing a sword. By all accounts, she's a fairly average girl. Because of this, she has to come up with her strategies on the fly, and then she has to figure out how to put her plans into action, one by one.

This volume saw Kiara survive the spellcaster transformation, but her magic is limited; she can't toss out spells left and right. Fortunately, she has a strong support network: the kind and considerate prince, the strong-willed protagonist, the protagonist's knight-guard, and even an undead mentor. These men don't always understand her, but they'll always be there for her when she needs them most.

In the future, I'd like to end the series with Kiara realizing her ideal "victory." Somewhere along the way, the romantic loose ends will be tied up, and the score will be settled...

Okay, I have a confession to make: when I first started writing this story, I only had the beginning and the end planned out. That way I could write as much as my heart desired, and whenever my motivation started to peter out, I could wrap it up without much trouble. It's pathetic, I know, but the only reason I've kept writing as long as I have is because of all the kind words offered to me by my readers. Honestly, thank you so much. From here on out, whenever I yell at myself to "keep writing, damn it!" I'll imagine not only my online readers, but all the people who went out and brought my books home with them, too.

Speaking of, I still have more work left to do...

Thank you to my editor, who pulled out all the stops to make this book a reality. And a big thank you to my illustrator, Fuji Mitsuya-sama, for making time in your busy schedule to adorn my book with your exquisite artwork. Not only did you give Kiara such a sweet smile, but you've also made my boys very handsome, too—I can't thank you enough. But more than anything... I'm so sorry for making you draw a hideous clay figurine! I swear, I just *really* needed to see what it would look like.

Lastly, I'd like to thank the editing department at Shufu to Seikatsu Sha—the proofreaders, the printers, and everyone else who helped get this book published. But most of all, I extend my gratitude to my dear readers. Thank you for choosing my book!

—Kanata Satsuki, September 2015







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I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 1

by Kanata Satsuki

Translated by Molly Lee Edited by Taylor Fonzone

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